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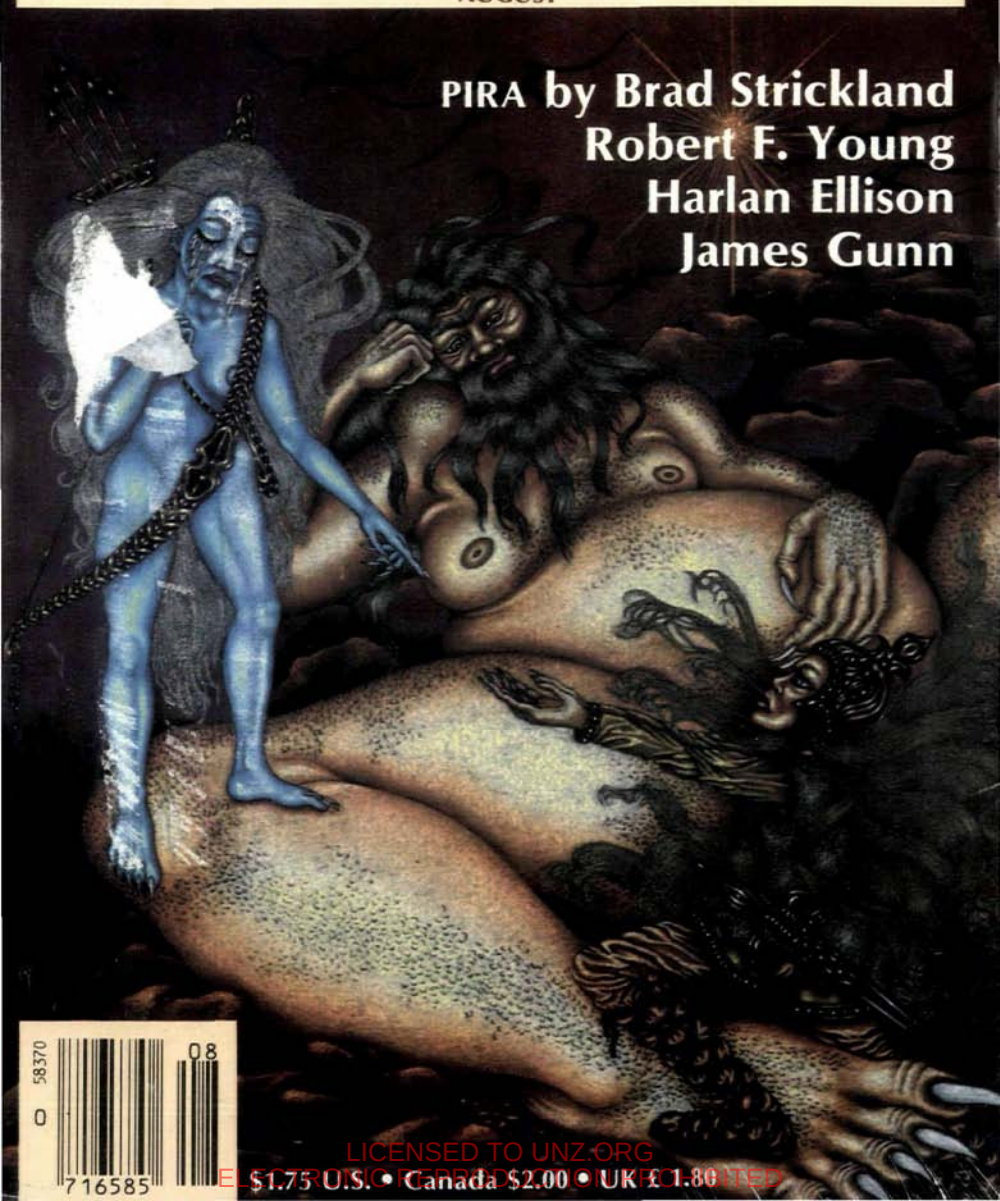

PIRA by Brad Strickland
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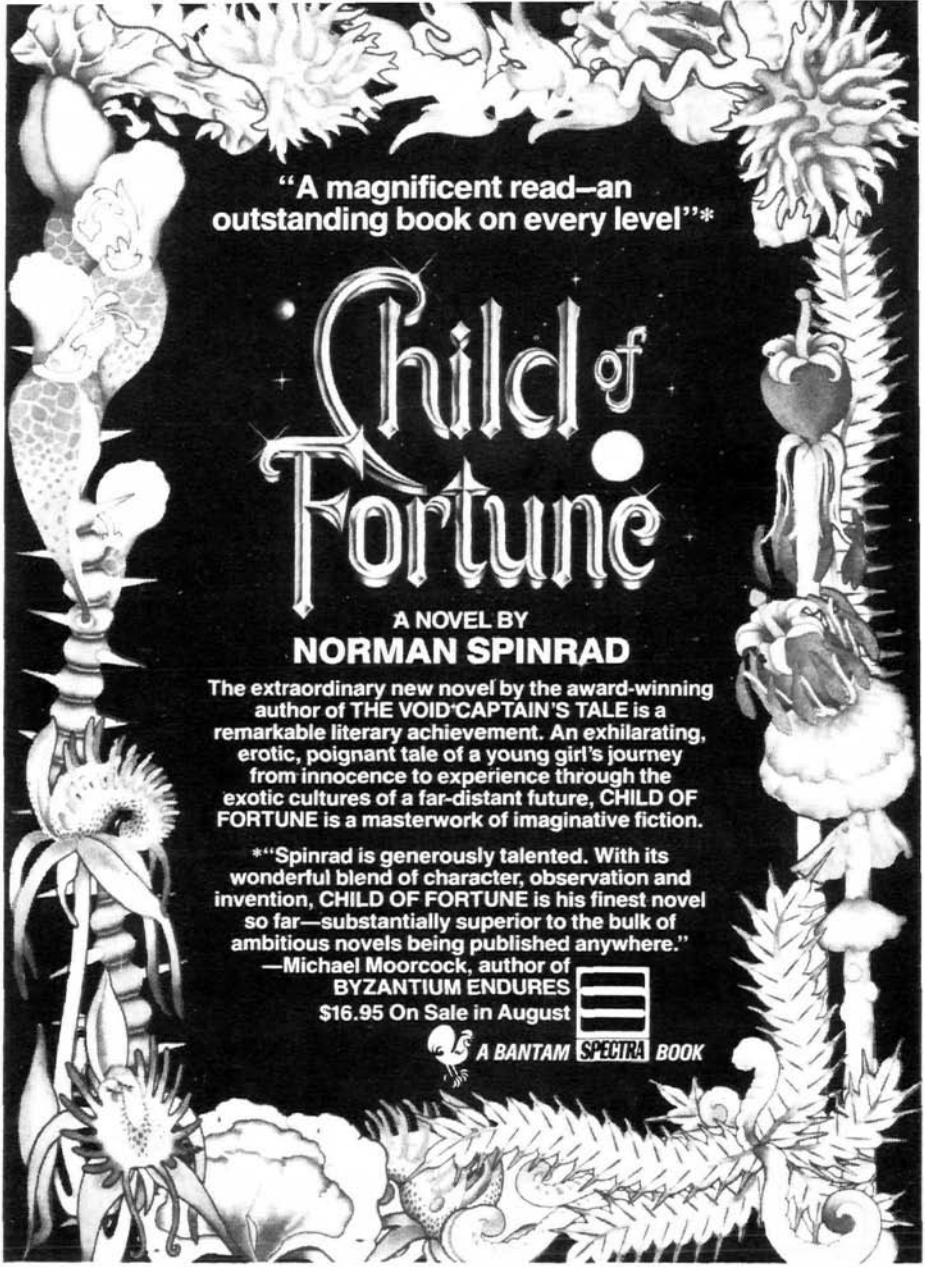
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COVER BY R. J. KRUPOWICZ FOR "PIRA"

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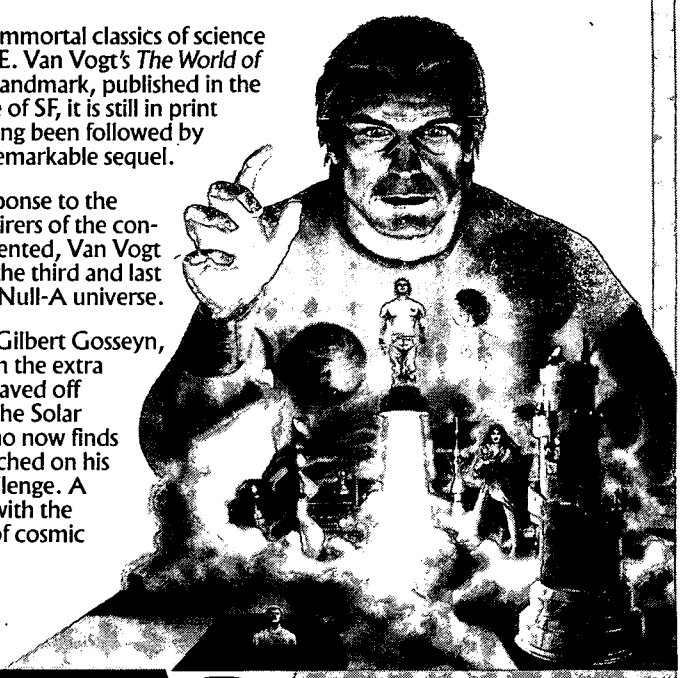

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Pira

BY

BRAD STRICKLAND

The two oddly matched travelers had left the last furrowed field behind and were well under the canopy of Greenhallow Wood when Pira's ears were assaulted — and not for the first time — by Festo's broken, croaking tenor:

Come hither, Love, and lie with me
Beneath the merry greenwood tree;
Bring a loaf of bread and jug of wine—
Then show me yours, I'll show you mine!

"Hush, Fool," Pira said.

Twisting in his saddle, Festo smiled back as though acknowledging a compliment. "My lady enjoys music?"

"I'd sooner listen to your jackass braying."

"Say not so, Lady. The matter offends you, not the sound. The words are too taffeta-and-treacle for such serious business as ours. The second verse I've made much grimmer. Hear:

If you, my Love, can't come to me
Beneath the merry greenwood tree,
At least send the loaf and jug of wine,
For my belly cleaves fast unto my spine!

Pira did not smile. "Peace, Festo!"

"Peas?" the little man asked ruminatively. "I am not partial to legumes, Lady, but if we have no better provender—"

Pira silenced his prattle with a look dark as building thunder. Then, in a milder voice than before, she said, "I'm sorry, Jester. While my lord lies suffering, I will not take my ease."

"But Athon's not your lord. Not yet, anyway; you are only his be-

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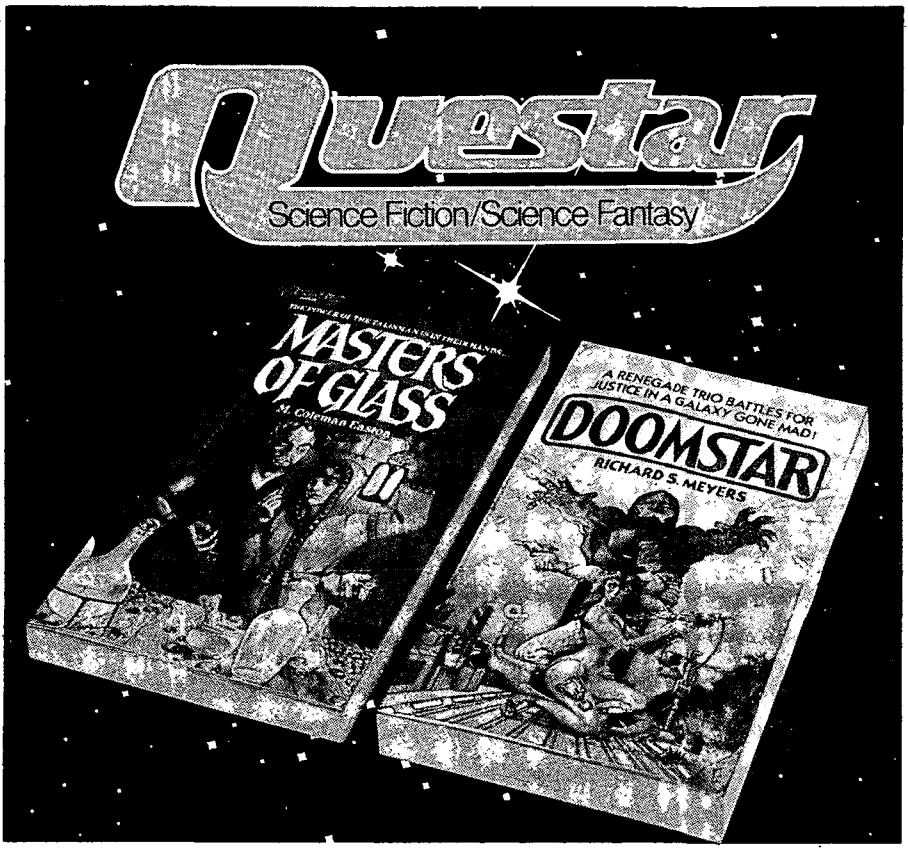

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trothed. Do you love the king so much already?"

"Love has nothing to do with it, Crookleg. Our fathers arranged the match years ago. Athon was twelve, I ten."

"Yes, I recall your first visit to the castle. You were fair even as a child."

Pira studied the dwarf in motley who rode before her, his arms and legs like child-sized, twisted parts, stuck badly onto a grown man's torso. "Were you there? I don't remember you at all, Festo."

"No? Ah, well, I was only a palace brat a year younger than Prince Athon then. I was not yet famous; not a fool yet, you see. Oops!" The jester's mount had momentarily balked. The little man leaned against the animal's neck to urge the beast into renewed motion. "Old John thinks it's time to eat, too," the fool announced.

"Our animals will eat as soon as we reach this tunnel."

"Faith, by then I'll be hungry enough to eat *them*, hide, harness, and shoes," Festo muttered. After a moment he added, "Lady, will you want me to lead you into Hell?"

"You will stay with the horse and ass."

Festo sighed. "Left behind with my brothers." He clucked comfortably to John. He and Pira rode for a while in the cool, fresh air of deep forest, the smell of black earth and green trees rich in their nostrils. At length, Festo once more broke the silence: "No one tells a fool anything. I saw the king's army return, flying the pennons of victory. I saw Athon, pale and grim, borne inside on a litter. Yet no one would say what wound he suffered."

Pira looked past the fool, into green distance. "If you must know, Athon was struck in the breast by an arrow of black ice. The leeches tell me no remedy in this world can halt his slow death — and so I must seek balm from the next. The hermit spoke of an artifact of Hell, a wondrous gem called the Heart of Healing."

"You visited the hermit on the Mount of Pines," Festo said. "And the old man told you that years ago I was one of the hunting party that discovered this passageway. And since you are so much stronger than a poor crippled fool—"

"You gallantly consented to be my guide," Pira finished for him. "The land rises. How far, now, to these hills?"

The leaf covering had become lighter, and here and there sunlight shafted slanting to the forest floor. Festo squinted at its angle. "If I do not drop from starvation, Lady, we should be at the tunnel somewhat after sunset."

"So we shall be."

And so they were. The tunnel opening was a tall, narrow crevice in the face of a limestone bluff, an opening so narrow that it left barely enough room for a full-grown war-

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rior to squeeze through, though Pira, in her boy's mail and helmet, and armed only with a short sword, could pass easily enough; as, for that matter, might Festo, had the dwarf wanted to enter. But if he did, he showed no sign. Bustling about with his waddling gait, he took care of the mounts while Pira braced one hand on the rough stone lip of the crevice and leaned to gaze into the deepening dark. She stood like that a long while. Finally, Festo's call roused her.

Full night had come, and the sky was strewn with stars of late summer. The jester had started a campfire, and over it simmered a savory stew. "Come," he urged. "Never go to Hell on an empty stomach."

Drawing close to the fire, Pira accepted a mug of stew, cradled it in her hands, absorbing the warmth. "How far is it — through the tunnel?"

Festo poked at the fire with a long stick, sending sparks whirling up like rising stars, gone to join their sisters in the Hay-Wain or to become part of the Hunter's bright belt. The fool looked up, his face unusually grim in the underlight of the fire. "I did not journey that way, Lady. Of the dozen who did, only one returned."

Pira nodded. "The bishop."

"Bishop he was then. Your precious babbling mad hermit now." Festo hunched closer to the fire. "Who knows what lies inside the cavern, or how far it goes before leaving our world for the next?"

"A fool should know. I'm only a woman, yet I know well how far one can go in a tunnel."

Festo grinned, suddenly boyish. "There are two answers to that, Lady. The usual is this: 'How far can you go in a tunnel? Halfway; then you're coming out.'"

"What is the second answer?"

"My own: 'How far can you go in a tunnel? Depends on whom you're with.'"

Pira chuckled and set aside the untasted stew. "I like your 'whom,' Fool." She stared into the heart of the fire. She felt her shadow behind her, stretched long and thin, a black arrow pointing at the blacker slash of the tunnel mouth. After a few moments, she shook herself. "If I'm not here again in three days, return to Athon's castle and tell of the last of me. Be sure they burn Athon's body, with all due rites. None of this burial. Tell them only burning will set the king's soul free. And have them put something in Athon's death-song to tell folk of my failed attempt."

"You will wait for morning?"

"Why? No sun will rise underground."

Pira took water for four days and food enough, at starvation ration, for only three. She kindled a torch, strode to the cavern, entered, and paused only once, to look back at the dwarf's outline, grotesque against the glow of the campfire. Then she lifted the torch and moved into the deeper darkness.

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The path beneath her sandals sloped downward. She held the torch in her left hand, stretched out her right to steady herself against the cool, rough wall of stone. At times the ceiling rock pressed almost against her head, and she left behind a stinking, smoke-black trail where her torchfire licked it; again, the overhead rock soared away, with only echoes to tell her of the cathedral vaults above. Now she walked in near-silence, the grinding of sand beneath her feet and the pumped blood singing in her veins loud in her ears. Now came the *thip-thip-thip* of eternally dripping water, beating slow march time for her. Thrice she halted to draw a new torch from the supply strapped to her back; and each time, the newly kindled light flickered only on rock walls and the path, sloping always down, down, down.

So long she walked that at last she walked almost asleep. At first she mistook the red glow ahead for the ruddy reflection of her torch off a wet wall, but then air gusted in her face, dry, hot, and perfumed with brimstone. The glow took shape, became a sharp, high archway opening to — Pira stepped through. She stood in the open, under an empty black sky. No, not quite empty.

One star shone.

A solitary star, the color of blood, stood halfway up the sky on her right hand, a baleful crimson beacon more brilliant than any other star she had seen. Its ruddy light was nearly as bright as that of a full moon, and it illumined a dreary country. Pira took more steps forward, raising her torch. The tunnel-arch opened amid a jumble of boulders, and behind her reared sheer rock cliffs. A doleful hissing filled the air. Pira let the torch drop, snuffed it against the ground, and waited to accustom her eyes to the vaster gloom. Now she saw to her left a great chasm in the rock, from which dimly glowing vapors steamed. The cleft cut a huge incurving sickle; near its point was a ridge of stone, on which stood a statue — or a human. Pira moved toward it.

"That is Lumiel, mortal!" boomed a stony voice behind her.

Pira spun, drew her sword, dropped to a crouch — and realized her puny weapon was useless. Close against the cliffside reclined a naked giant, ten times man-sized, his bent left leg framing the tunnel mouth, his knee braced to support the top of the arch — she had stepped out under it. In the red glare of the star, she had an impression of massiveness, of weight beyond that of flesh: of living stone.

The giant face was obscure in the gloom, but Pira felt eyes on her. The voice rumbled again: "I am Sha'bbat, Keeper of the Way." The figure stirred slightly, grating and grinding. "Rarely these days does a living mortal travel this path. You are in the Land Beneath the Crimson Star, O mortal."

"Demon Sha'bbat," Pira replied,

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tightening her grip on the sword hilt, "I come to seek the Heart of Healing. Where may I find it?"

"I know the bait whereof you speak, mortal. A ruby amulet, whose power is that it can, once in a generation of men, heal a mortal wound." The giant chuckled with a sound like pebbles rattling over a boulder. "Come, that is a puny thing to seek. There are so many others, woman, more ... tempting. Pleasure outside your mate's bed, all delicious and undetected; a fountain of riches wherewith to indulge your whims; or there is revenge, a sweet intoxicant drunk from a steel chalice; or—"

"I seek the Heart of Healing."

The giant sighed, a desert wind fingering loose sand. "That only? That toy you may find at the Citadel of Satur — if you can travel so far. Our paths are treacherous to living feet."

"Tell me the way."

"I keep the Way; I don't tell it. Find it yourself, mortal. Or you might ask Lumiel. I, you see, do only my office: I keep the Way open. Lumiel, though, is more like you. She sometimes ... concerns herself with mortal undertakings. Yes, ask the Taker of Tolls; ask Lumiel."

Warily, Pira looked behind her. Her eyes, used to the strange light, saw more clearly the standing figure atop the hillock — the hillock she could now recognize as Sha'bbat's bent right knee, resting on the ground. Pira took a great breath and sheathed her weapon before venturing toward Lumiel.

When she had come near enough to see the figure's features, Pira stopped short, the air knotted in her chest. Lumiel was a naked woman, her skin a deep midnight blue. Armed with a bow and a quiver of arrows, she stood with her left foot slightly outthrust, her hips cocked as though she had held that position for eons. She wore an unearthly beauty and perfection of form, with breasts high and well shaped, waist narrow, hips full. Her hair gleamed silver in the light of the single star, and her face, filled though it was with loveliness mingled with grief, was monstrous. She had wept, this archer; over her cheeks the tears had spread and frozen, welding her eyelids shut, dripping in fanglike icicles on either side of her chin.

"Come, mortal," she said in a voice like low string music.

"You — you are no demon."

"Once, long ago, I was like you, a human woman. That which I now am, I am forever."

"I — you heard me speak of my quest?"

"Yes. It is fruitless. Return now. Do not pass me, and you will not have to pay in the coin of our world."

"But I come to save my betrothed from death."

"Others have come on similar journeys. Few have returned. None have wholly succeeded."

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Pira fingered her sword hilt. "Still, I must try. What is the way, Lumiel?"

The standing figure inclined her head, a weary gesture. "You must traverse the Mire of Regret; cross the Dark River; and then keep to the path through the Forest of Possibility. At the end of the path, in a clearing, you will see the Scarlet Citadel. But it would be better if you never saw it."

"How far, in what direction?"

"Do you see the Star?"

"Yes. It is at my right hand, midway up the sky."

"That is our east. Your way lies north and west. You may reach the Citadel in the time it takes the Star to reach zenith, and return well before it sets, if you are firm of purpose. But beware! Do not let the Star set while you are still in our country."

"Why?"

The fanged face turned in blind pity toward Pira. "I had reached just this spot — nearly free, nearly free! when the Star sank on my own quest. When the light goes, so goes your freedom. Darkness took me here and made me what you see."

Pira shuddered. Then, with another deep breath, she stepped past the archer. The crack in the ground that she had noticed scythed to within a pace of Sha'bbat's knee, and she trod carefully the narrow passage between chasm and demon, her eyes streaming against the acrid fumes. Deep within the crevice, she saw a roiling floor of molten rock, glowing white-hot, belching and hissing. In a moment she had left it behind and viewed the countryside more clearly.

The hillside dipped down in an easy slope, losing itself finally in distance and darkness. The far horizon was merely a more solid blackness than the sky, suggestive of sharp-peaked, barren mountains. In the middle distance were humped forms — trees, she supposed — and at their feet wound a black snake, reflecting the red light of the Star here and there. That must be the river she had to cross. Pira glanced once more at the Star to orient herself and began to descend the slope, heading north and west.

She walked through ankle-high grass and felt sudden stinging pain. Dismayed, she stepped back, against five or six hungry tugs. The grass waved, its blades yearning for her flesh. She saw tiny sucker-mouths at the end of each blade, some of them wet with drops of blood. She drew her sword and slashed, and the blades of grass flew. Pira sheathed the sword. The grass grew in tussocks, and she could, with care, thread her way around them. Intent on the path, Pira paused after a few yards, shivering. She had a strong feeling, for an instant, of being followed; but behind her the slope climbed empty toward the cliffs. The only eye visible was that of the Star, and that she defied. Avoiding the thirsty grass, Pira resumed her journey.

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This underworld was not an utterly silent place, but its sounds seemed always on the edge of hearing: thin groans, as though from many yards under the ground, vibrated against the soles of her sandals; black flying things wheeled high, sending down long keening cries like the memory of an echo; and all around her, the whole land seemed to breathe ponderously.

The ground underfoot became springy, then marshy, and the hummocks of grass gave way to scattered, knee-high shrubs, their branches sprouting from squat, thick stumps. Pira mistrusted these, too, and took care to move between them without touching, for it seemed to her that as she passed, the leaves stirred faintly in her direction, in no breeze. The wet path sucked at her feet, trying to tug off her sandals, and let her go on only reluctantly.

"Pira...."

She stopped, certain for a moment that she had only imagined the call. Or dreamed it — she was weary enough.

"Pira!"

A breathy but somehow familiar voice, coming from somewhere to her left. "Who calls me? Who is there?"

"Aleppa." A woman's voice, no doubt this time. "Aleppa the Sword. You knew me in life...."

Pira felt ice in her bones. "You're dead! They told me you fell in the king's last battle!"

"Slain, slain! Killed by a sorcerous lance in the midst of my sins of wrath and hatred — and so I am punished, I find myself here. Help me, Pira!"

"Where are you?"

"Here. Down here." The voice rang with a hollow timbre from low, near the ground. Parting the leaves of the bushes with her sword, Pira sought it out.

And stopped frozen when she found the source. Aleppa had never been fair. Her features were sharp as the weapon she took as nickname. All her days she had scorned the soft life of a courtesan for that of a warrior, and her skill with a blade had made her a trusted fighter in Athon's own guard. But now the keen face looked up from the ground, for Aleppa was buried to the neck in soft muck. The Star glittered in twin reflections from her lifted eyes. She seemed at first to be bearded; then Pira realized that Aleppa's chin had sprouted rootlets that sank to feed in the foulness of the marsh, and the woman's blackened tongue lolled from her open mouth.

Then, looking more closely at the neighboring clumps, Pira could see that they, too, had once been human heads. Now branches sprouted from eyes, ears, and nostrils; and the tongues, plunging out from the mouths, had become swollen, forked roots: and still the plants stirred with half-sentient life.

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"They spare no punishment here," Aleppa said. "Do you yet live?"

"I do."

"The battle? How went it after my death?"

"Athon's arms were victorious."

The warrior-woman barked out a laugh. "Then I've cheated you, Hell!" she cackled. "Now do your worst to me; I care not." The eyes glittered at Pira again. "Water. From the river." The eyes shifted, pointing. "That way. I thirst, Pira. Fetch me water — one drink only. When my tongue swells, when I am sealed deaf and blind forever, I will think on that one drink and bless you through all eternity."

Pira offered her canteen. "One drink only, Aleppa."

"No mortal water!" hissed the head. "That would be worse torment than you know, to taste again the water of our world. Fetch me river water, Pira!"

"Very well." Pira retreated to the path, marked the way in her mind, and pushed through to the verge of the river, a thick and sluggish tide, black in the light of the Star, now high up in the eastern sky. Pira removed her helmet and dipped into the stream, then carefully bore the water back along the path.

"Aleppa?" she called as she neared the spot she remembered.

"Here, Pira, here! Bless you, child!"

Pira had turned from the path too far to the right. She pushed through brush, found Aleppa, and knelt, proffering the helmet. The head craned eagerly. "Closer, child! D'ye think I'll bite?"

Pira leaned closer. With a sound of a tree root being wrenched from the earth, Aleppa's arms tore free and grabbed for her, even as the horrid mouth gaped, the black tongue writhing—

And Pira was snatched backward, dropping the helmet. Aleppa howled, beat the mushy earth with frustrated fists, as Pira rolled free of the new attacker, bounded to her feet, drew her blade.

"I won't hurt you," said the man.

"Who are you?" Pira demanded.

The man frowned. He was young, perhaps Pira's age, taller than she by half a head. He wore jerkin and trousers of soft brown leather, and the light of the Star showed him handsome in a way, with tousled brown curls and a face that held the transitory beauty of an adolescent on the very edge of manhood. But now the face reflected wariness. "What do you mean?" he said.

"I mean who are you? I seek no aid from demons!"

"I am no demon, Lady. I am a man, mortal as you."

Aleppa hissed like a snake. Her arms scrabbled in the mud, flung aside the fallen helmet.

The young man stepped back. "Come away from her. She is mad with lust. No; let the helmet go. Give her no other chance."

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Pira followed him back to the path. "What did she want?"

"Your life, I think. See here?" He lifted the leaves of a bush. At the foot — or the head — stretched a human skeleton, its neck now inextricable from the plant that had been a man's or woman's soul. The stranger let the leaves go and straightened as they swished back into place. "I think Aleppa — all these things — could hold onto their mortal forms a little longer with a draft of blood."

Blood. The blood-red Star. Pira glanced at it. It was very near to zenith. "I have to go."

"I'll go with you."

"But I don't know you!"

"Are formal introductions necessary in Hell? Call me Walker, if you wish. I've walked far enough."

"I am Pira. I seek—"

"I know what you seek. I came the same way you did. Come, let us go. The Star is ever moving." Seeing her still hesitate, Walker added, "Lady, I will not take the treasure from you. It would do me no good. My quest is different from yours. Let us go."

"I am good with a sword," she warned.

The young man smiled. "I am good with no weapon at all," he said as they began to move.

The river crossing was dreadful. The black water would not hold them up to swim, and so they waded, in stench up to their necks, their feet dragging through slimy, pulped mulm, cold, ankle-deep, rotted. When they staggered onto the far bank, Pira almost wept with relief. It would be long before she would feel clean again. Her companion tugged her arm. "Let us go."

Ahead bulked the forest, low trees curiously bulbous, as though festooned with bladders. The Star, directly overhead now, cast utter shadow beneath the trees. As the travelers neared, Pira saw that the trees bore a kind of fruit, dangling in grape-like clusters, each fruit the size of a man's head, green, translucent, and faintly aglow. "These are strange," Walker said.

"Follow the path," Pira said. "I was warned."

The trees closed on either side. The glowing fruits did nothing to light the way; rather, they merely indicated the nearness of the trees, and left a black slash that was the path. Walker reached out curiously and prodded one fruit. "It feels as if it's full of water," he said.

"Come on."

Pira was about to take out tinderbox and torch when the trees finally broke ahead, and once again she saw the countryside lit by the Star. "At last. I was beginning to think we'd never — Walker?"

He did not answer. "Walker? I don't have time to search for you," she warned.

What she said was true, but nonetheless, she kindled a light and start-

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ed back along the path. She found him perhaps a hundred paces back, his eyes locked on one of the green globes, tears glistening on his face. "What's wrong?" she asked. Walker did not answer. Like a seer with her descrying crystal, he was rapt on something he could see in the green light. Alarmed, Pira seized his shoulder. He tried to shrug her aside. Angry, Pira struck at the hanging fruit with her torch. The globe burst, showered a feculent liquid, and sent forth a pungent, choking stench.

At last Walker moved. He blinked at Pira in the torchlight, his eyes still distant. "What is it?" he asked.

"What is it? You were in a trance! What did you see in that — that thing?"

The man slumped and groaned. "Do not ask, Lady!"

"Was it so horrible? Our future perhaps?"

He shook his head. "My present — as it might have been."

"I don't understand."

Walker shook himself. "Every man's life takes turns he wishes he could unturn. When he sees the difference between what he might have been and what he is — it is a cruel vision. I won't look again."

"Come," Pira said. "The forest ends just ahead."

They left the trees behind, and in the center of a broad, bowl-shaped vale, Pira saw her goal: The Scarlet Citadel of Satur.

The structure was like no castle she had seen. Half-round, like a ball buried in the earth, the main keep glowed with a ruby light of its own; and six surrounding towers, dome-topped, shone with a similar but dimmer light. The whole was smooth, showing no trace of window or door. They approached it silently.

"This is no stone I have ever seen," Walker said, running his hands over the curving surface. "It's more like metal, yet not as hard somehow."

Pira reached to feel the surface herself — and her hand slipped through, as if she had tried the texture of mist. She felt strong fingers close upon her wrist, opened her mouth to cry out, and was dragged through the wall.

The cry half-escaped. She found herself standing inside the Citadel, in a huge domed space, her wrist tight in the grip of a tall, smiling man. She blinked at him, then said. "Doesn't anyone in Hell wear clothes?"

Her captor threw back his head and laughed. He was tall, strong-featured, his skin the same ruby hue as the dome; and his body was pleasant to look upon. "You are delightful," he told her in a deep voice. "Most of your kind would scream or swoon. I'm glad to find you so spirited." He dropped her wrist.

Pira rubbed it and looked around. At the center of the huge room was a throne, and before it an altarlike table surmounted by a small jeweled

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chest. There were no other furnishings. "I seek—" she began.

"I know what you seek, mortal. I wonder if you shall get it."

"Where is my companion?"

"The man? See him if you wish."

The walls of the keep shimmered into transparency, and Pira saw Walker, pacing the outer boundary. "Here I am!" she called.

Once more the keep was solid and opaque. "He cannot see or hear you," the demon told Pira. "This Citadel, you see, is the product of my thought. I can make it solid — for some — or airy — for others — as I wish. It is a matter of concentration."

"The Heart of Healing," Pira said. "Is it here?"

"In the box, there," her captor said, with a negligent gesture toward the altar. "It is mine. I am Satur."

"I mean to take it with me," Pira said.

"If I refuse to give it to you?"

Pira drew her sword. Satur smiled at her. "Such fire! I have not been attacked by a mortal wielding a weapon in a thousand years." He spread his arms. "Try, woman."

Pira struck quickly, with a thrust that should have skewered him —but her blade passed through him as through air, meeting no resistance, making no mark. The demon laughed again. "It is hard, you see, to slay one of us on his own ground. However, we might discuss — a trade?"

Pira did not sheathe her sword. "What kind of trade?"

Satur's smile broadened, and he nodded. Something glimmered in the corner of her eye. She chanced a look. A bed had materialized, as plush as the couch of an Oriental king.

"No," she said.

"Then go, woman. You bore me. Observe, please, that I take nothing by force — but I yield nothing to those who refuse me."

Pira backed toward the throne. Before she had neared it, she found her way blocked by a smooth, invisible wall. "You're doing this."

"Of course I am. What shall it be, woman? A bit of pleasant dalliance, and my full permission to open the chest and remove the Heart of Healing, or shall I merely throw you out? Choose."

"If I agreed, you would trick me."

"By the seven rivers of Hell, I swear that you will not be stopped by me from taking the Heart of Healing," Satur said. "None of us can break that oath."

With a furious cry, Pira hurled aside her sword. "Come, then!" She tore at her mail coat, loosened it, let it fall; kicked off her sandals; shrugged out of her soft chamois tunic and leggings; pushed off her loin-wrap; and stood naked. "Come, demon! Quickly!"

Satur was priapic already. At first like dry, hot mist, he came against her; then real, solid, he bore her back to the bed, his skin hot against hers,

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his muscled thigh parting her own legs. He clamped his hands tight on her buttocks. He burned, burned against her; and yet when he entered her, she felt he was made of ice. She cried between clenched teeth, rode with him, and despite herself felt the dizzy upswing of purely physical excitement. Satur had not breathed before, but now he was ever more real and gasped in passion, his breath hot and scented with ginger. He pushed her up, up, up, to the high peak, and she reeled over the edge at last.

"I think," he whispered against her throat as her heart thudded hard against her ribs, "I think I shall send you back with a special gift." He kissed each of her closed eyelids once. "Though some might call it a curse."

Then he was off her. She sat up, blinking. The walls of the Citadel had gone transparent again, and staring in at her, his arms spread as though he were crucified against the wall—

"No!" she cried.

Satur grinned at her. "I thought he might at least have a look."

"Damn you!"

The demon's smile broadened. "It's much too late to damn me, woman. Oh, you think you can cover shame with a few garments? Yes, clothe yourself, that's right."

Eyes averted from the stricken gaze of Walker, Pira dressed. "Now the Heart," she snarled.

"Take it."

She walked unobstructed to the altar, opened the jeweled lid of the chest. Inside, large as a man's fist, glittered a faceted ruby that had to be her object. She reached to lift it—

And her fingers passed through.

Pira spun in rage. Satur held up an admonishing finger. "*I* am not stopping you."

"Who is?"

"The jewel itself, I suppose. It's not of my making, you know; not of this world at all. I made the chest, and its magic is obedient to me. But the jewel — it is from elsewhere. It has a very pure magic."

"What do you mean?"

"Only a virgin can remove it from its chest," Satur laughed.

With an inarticulate cry, Pira lifted the chest and hurled it. Satur tried to raise a warding hand — but the chest struck him low in the belly, and he crumpled, howling. The keep shivered around them.

"You can be hurt!" Pira cried. "Hurt by your own creations!" She cast about for another missile, felt the demon grab her, bit furiously at his claws — and found they were Walker's hands.

"Come on!" the young man shouted. "Before the walls turn solid!"

Satur, his red face gone deep purple, groaned on the floor. Beyond him even the chest faded to near-invisibility. Walker dragged Pira across the room.

"Listen, demon!" she called back. "You wasted your effort! You hear?

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Our gardener was there long before you. And he — he was *better*!"

"Come *on*!" Walker hurled her through walls as thin as the film of a soap bubble.

They fell together. "I grow tired of your pushing me about, Walker," Pira growled.

"I'll try not to do it anymore." Behind them the Citadel had become as substantial as when they had first glimpsed it.

In a dead voice, Pira muttered, "You — saw?"

"And heard, partly."

She sighed. "Now I've killed the king."

"No." Walker reached inside his jerkin. "Here." He held the Heart.

"You—" Pira stammered. "But only a virgin could — you're a—" she looked at him, and knowledge came into her eyes. "You're Festo."

"Am I myself again?"

"You still look — as you did in the marsh. But I see your self now, in your eyes. What happened? How were you transformed?"

The young man got painfully to his feet. "If you mean, how do I come to be different in your sight, I don't know. The light of the Star, perhaps. To myself, I seem as I have been since childhood, since the day a playmate gave me a little push. We were exploring a parapet, you see — forbidden play. I fell right off when he shoved. I broke my fall, first, with my legs, by hitting a roof. I broke my legs, too. And the roof. From there I tumbled into the courtyard, where I tried to amuse the crowd with a falling handstand. That proved a second mistake. Shattered legs, shattered arms — I was only twelve then. My limbs healed badly and never kept pace with the rest of me after that." His smile was bitter. "Of course I'm a virgin. What woman could love a twisted fool?"

"I would kiss you, if you would not feel defiled."

"Not I, my lady." He looked to the sky. "But our time is very short. Here." He placed the jewel in her hand, and this time she felt its cold heaviness.

"I can touch it now."

"I think the spell worked only inside that place. Satur — he doesn't care now, you see. That, I think is the worst of Hell. If you felt the whole land hated you, bent itself in malice to your destruction, you could bear up. But this malignant indifference — that is the worst torment of Hell."

They left the Citadel behind. The Star had slipped far down the western sky. It was more than halfway to its rest when they cleared the forest; had moved a handbreadth closer to the horizon as they forded the river; and rested almost on the jagged western rim as they toiled up the hill to the tunnel. But when Lumiel once again was in sight, they had minutes to spare. "We'll make it," Pira said, daring finally to hope.

"Halt, travelers," came Lumiel's

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voice as they came within a few paces of her. "Now you must pay the Toll." She nocked an arrow. "The coin is mortal blood. Who shall pay?"

They were within sight of the cavern. Pira looked at the standing archer. "Lumiel," she said softly, with great sorrow, "You would not do this. You are as I am."

"I was once. Now I am a guardian of Hell. Speak, and let the survivor move quickly, for I feel the Star sinking."

Pira turned to Festo. "Here, take the Heart," she said in a level voice. "Though I do not know how to loose its magic—"

"It's simple enough," the stony voice of Sha'bbat said. "Place the gem on the chest of the sufferer. It will return home when its healing spell has worked itself."

Pira gave no sign of having heard. "Take it to the king" she told Festo. Turning, she called, "Now, Lumiel!"

"So be it." The arm pulled smoothly back, tautening the bowstring. An arrow sang, and Pira felt the jolt, fell to her knees, cried out. But she had been struck from behind. Festo slumped over her, an arrow in his chest.

"Oh, Fool," Lumiel said quietly, and Pira somehow knew that more tears were freezing.

Pira touched Festo's cheek. He opened his eyes, full of pain. "I pushed you again, Lady." His fingers fumbled. "Take back the Heart."

"I might — I could use it to—"

"No. Take it to the king. Even healed, I should still be Festo."

Behind them, Sha'bbat began to laugh. "I will not," Pira said under her breath, "I will *not* let them have your soul."

"There is no way—"

"There is one way. The chasm. Fire purifies."

Pira lifted him. Festo had only his own weight, hardly more than a boy's. Beside the chasm she kissed him once; and then she let him fall. Demon Sha'bbat roared again, this time in anger, as a blossom of fire welled up. A hot wind whipped Pira's hair, urging her toward the tunnel; and in the wind she thought she heard the fool's soft voice: "Now! Go now!"

The Star glimmered and guttered. Pira dashed for the opening, saw Sha'bbat's huge leg moving, dived under it—

There was not even an echo. She lay in utter darkness, utter soundlessness, without sword, without helmet, but with a treasure clutched to her chest. She stretched there exhausted, thought of the stricken king, and dragged herself up toward the light of her own world.

Pira frightened the peasants on her ride back, for she carried about her a fell look. At the palace the physicians refused to let her see Athon, but took the Heart from her and bade her wait in her own chamber. She paced the floor nervously, waiting for

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word. When at last she heard a step on the stair, she turned to question the messenger — and instead found herself facing Athon himself, blond, hale, and strong.

"My love," murmured the bearded king, taking a step toward her.

Pira shrank back. "You — you are well, my Lord?"

Athon smiled, his teeth white and even. "By miracle. Thanks to you."

"And to Festo."

Athon's blue eyes narrowed. "Yes, of course, the fool as well. What happened to him?"

"You did."

"What?"

"You — you pushed him. When you were children. You pushed him, and he fell from the parapet."

Athon's face reddened. "He told you, did he? Damn him! But I rewarded him well enough, I made amends, I gave him a position—"

"You made him a fool."

Athon shrugged. "And is that such a hard life, to be a fool? No battles to fight, no peasants to rule, no quarreling barons to reconcile? Festo should have thanked me. Now come, love. Victory sits on my banners, all the land is at peace, and at last we may celebrate our wedding."

Pira walked to the casement. The summer land lay gold and green in the long light of afternoon. "First," she said, "I think I'd better tell you exactly how I came to possess the Heart of Healing."

"If you wish."

She told him. Everything.

She turned when she had finished, and Athon would not meet her eyes. "I hardly know what to say, Pira. This changes things."

"Does it?"

Athon essayed a hollow chuckle. "Well, yes. A queen, Pira, after all — a queen can't have had, you know, a ... demon lover."

"I didn't know that rule."

"My position — the trust of my people—"

"Yes, I understand."

"But Pira, a woman, though she be not the queen — a woman who has the, ah, favor of the king — I mean, though I may not make you my queen, you could yet be dear to me, you could be a—"

"A sort of female fool? No, thank you, Athon. I think we had better leave it at that." Pira closed her eyes, then opened them again. "I will demand payment, though, for your cure."

Suspicion straightened Athon's back. "Payment?"

"Come, it's less than any leech would ask. Give me my choice of a suit of armor and of a sword from your armory; let me take my pick of the steeds in your stables; and set me free to wander where I will. That is all."

Athon could not hide the relief that flooded his face. "It is little enough. Granted, Pira."

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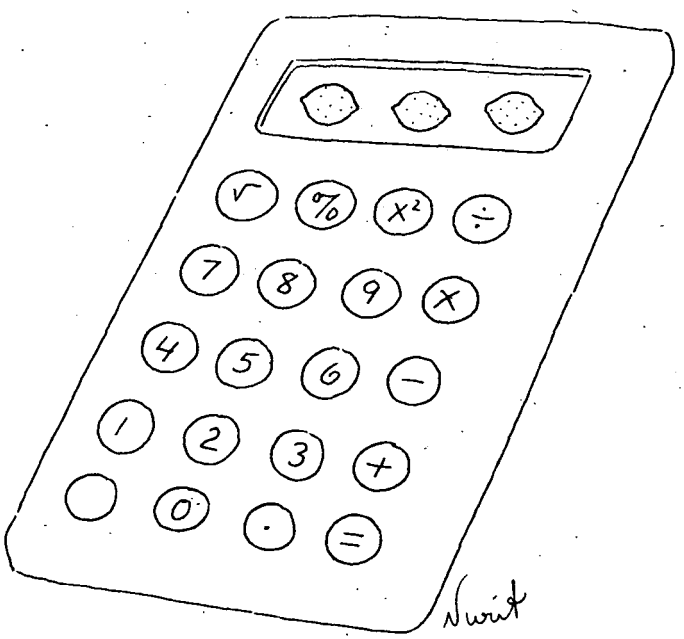
Pira's smile was wry. "Thank you, my lor — Your Majesty."

After that, Pira rode for many years, and many were the tales told of her, some stranger than others. One was that she traveled with the shade of a gallant young man who sometimes sang ghostly songs to her in the twilit forest. Another tale often repeated was that she had gained somewhere the gift of double sight, and that when she looked at a person, she saw not the body only, but the soul also. Sometimes the one fitted the other as a hand a glove; but as often, a weak, unprepossessing body would house the spirit of a hero; and again, a stalwart man had within him a shriveled, ugly, brutish little soul.

This gift, it is said, warned her away from the bed of King Athon, he of ignoble and detested memory and — blessedly — short reign.



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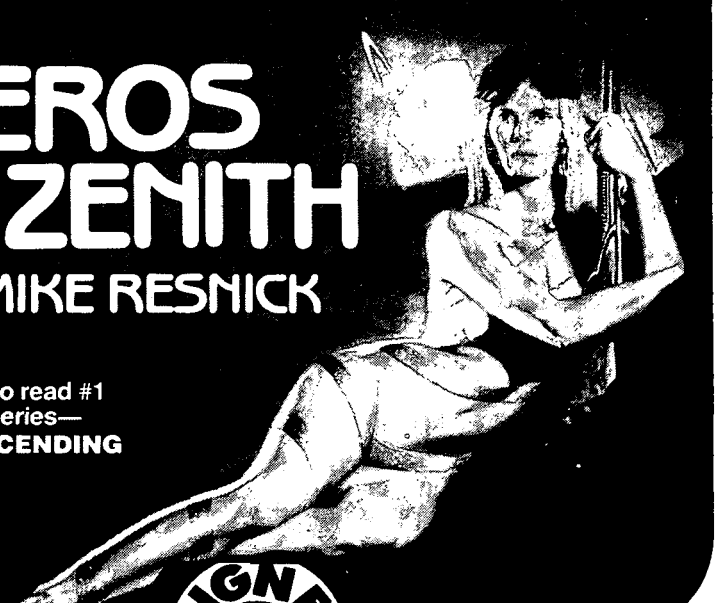

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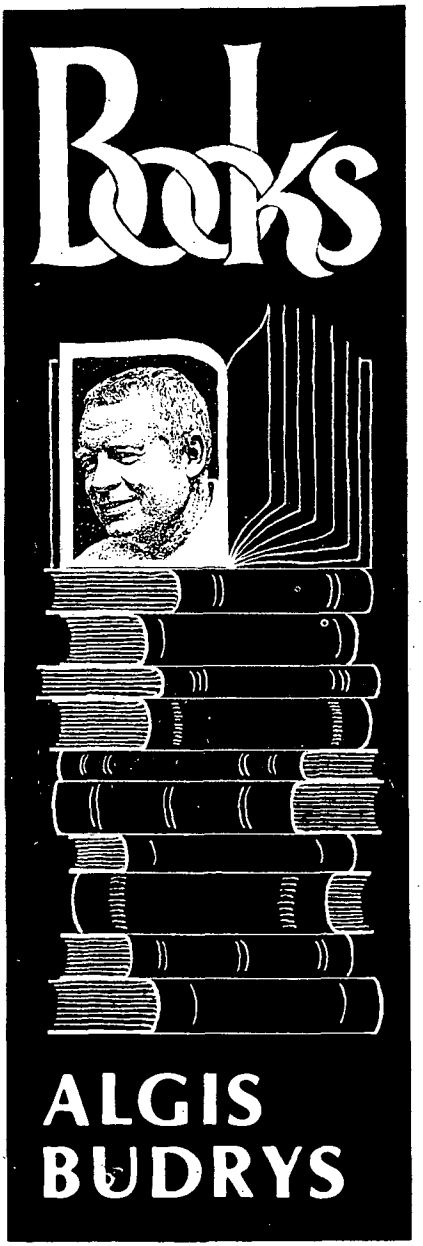

Footfall, Larry Niven & Jerry Pournelle, Del Rey, $17.95

Neuromancer, William Gibson, Ace, $2.95

Browsers' Corner:
The Great Divide, Frank M. Robinson and John Levin, Rawson, Wade Publishers Inc., $13.95 (1982)

It would be a mistake to scorn *Footfall.*

Ambitious, sprawling, heavily populated, Niven and Pournelle's novel of alien invasion is fitted-out with tier after tier of pop verisimilitude and with criss-crossing sub-plots fully worthy of Herman Wouk or James Michener. Del Rey's bet, obviously, is that here is the next in the series of Del Rey SF titles on the Best Seller list. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if it makes it — is making it as you read this — for above all it is designed to give the naive reader the feeling that this is how it would be.

Above all, there has been visibly enormous auctorial concentration on sounding expert. There is "inside" detail, there is science popularization and a tour of science locales, there is nomenclature out the yingyang. This is what the people at NORAD would do, here are the adulterers, this how it would look at the astronomical observatory as the first evidence for an approaching interstellar spacecraft becomes undeniable, here is the countercultural hero on his motorcycle, this is what the National Guard and the survivalists would do as hos-

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tile action began, here is the nasty reporter bent on his exposé, this is what the President would do, etc., etc., etc.

In short, this is apparently what H.G. Wells would have done with *The War of The Worlds* if he'd had money, and the spectacular motion picture version can practically be seen playing in our heads right now.

But in long this is also a cracking good SF novel for SF readers. At bottom, it's shallow — the aliens are the same sort of fumblethumb invader that Eric Rank Russell's clever Earthmen were bamboozling to death back in the 1950s, and anybody can soon see that it's just a matter of time — but while the book is revving along toward its inevitabilities it does its energetic best to keep the SF thrills coming. Within the billows of Micheneric steam, oiled pistons are working deftly.

Seen as one example of collaborative technique, *Footfall* rates somewhere around a B. There are no visible outright breakdowns of communication between the two authors, but there are quite a few places where it seems evident that what one author thought would be fruitful was boring to the other. There are grandiose ante- and post-factum references to a "battle" by National Guard troops, but the actual battle seems quite anticlimactic; there is a plant about a child of an adulterous liaison, but nothing palpable ever comes of that; there are quite a few characters who are either over- or under-drawn for the work they end up doing. It seems quite likely a second draft would have resulted in a far better-rounded book and far fewer red herrings.

But the better way to look at this piece, I think, is to see it as two collaborative novels superimposed. It's the Michener-clone that has the slops and stumbles in it, and I think Niven and Pournelle both worked on that one. Conversely, they obviously both worked on the pure SF novel underneath it. So you can't filet this one along the obvious lines; it has two spines by two-headed intention, or at least as a result of intentionally two-headed procedures. Putting it another way, there definitely is a pony in here.

The SF proposition is that we are invaded from Centaurus by a herd race (not a hive race) that conducts social intercourse by surrender. Losers adopt a posture symbolic of submission and are symbolically trampled, whereupon they are at once assimilated into the victor's herd. There is no cultural concept of any surrender less than unconditional. So every herd member is equally trusted to be loyal to the herd, all outsiders are hostile until trampled, but surrender is not disloyalty to the old herd, it is loyalty to the new.

There is of course detail within this construct. The effort required to force surrender is a test of both par-

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ties' worth. So when Earth attempts to communicate with the approaching herd-vessel before it ever displays any hostile action against the human herd, the aliens are baffled. Which is nothing as compared to their outrage later, after they have summarily smashed our satellite stations and effected a landing in Kansas, when once-trampled Earthpeople go right on fighting as soon as possible. And when we hit Kansas with a nuclear strike, thus rendering it forever valueless to any herd, we exceed their capacity to understand our reasoning at all.

Many scenes are laid within the alien viewpoint, and these are stefnally fascinating because we see many ramifications of the basic proposition; we see contentions within the herd, and between those individuals who were born on the alien's planet and are loyal to the idea of living on dirt, and those who were born in space and don't really understand the object of the invasion, which of course was planned back on dirt. Neither side has loyalty to the home planet, of course, since this herd is the herd that gave up the home planet to another herd. And so on, through one trapdoor after another. There is no overwhelming sense that Niven and Pournelle are here proposing anything more than an intellectual game with the practiced SF reader, but that game is for many readers the great game.

Similarly, once we get past the bed-hopping, the story told from the human viewpoint contains all sorts of catchy what-ifs, chief among which is the eventual construction of a spacecraft propelled by nuclear-weapon explosions, on the model proposed by Freeman Dyson. What you do is sit on a big lid (in this case, one very big lid), and every so often you drop another bomb down a chute. Using this device, we get back up into space and join climactic battle with the herdship.

[It seems presumptuous to quibble with Doctor Dyson, especially since I've never actually read his "Orion" proposal, but I do have my doubts. If the first shockwave *can* actually lift the ship ahead of the high-temperature ball, and even if the ship's structure can be built to compensate for the gross mechanical forces, how about the finer ones? It seems to me this baby is going to resonate like J. Arthur Rank's gong. How does one propose to mount internal machinery and instrumentation, and how does one prevent the crew's turning to jelly with powder where its bridgework used to be?

Shifting my quibble directly to Niven and Pournelle, I think it's straining things quite a bit to get your kind of flight performance out of the very first one ever built on its very first liftoff.]

But you see what I mean — there are copious stefnal entertainments in this book, and I haven't in fact even

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touched on many other charms, amusing and otherwise, displayed within it. Among these is the notion that the U.S. defense command would turn for help to a think-tank staffed by SF writers, and another is an alien murder-mystery set on the herd-ship. Then there's the fact that the aliens are describable as two-trunked baby elephants whose (mis)adventures with interstellar technology have been set in motion by their discovery of some (monolithic?) entablatures, full of how-to-do-it wisdom, left by a now-vanished master race.

So, as I told you, this is a noteworthy SF novel, even if, as I also told you, in the end it's not so much what Earthpeople do, but what the aliens have been set up to be, that ensures Earth's victory. What the hell, H. G. Wells copped out even more radically than that, although I grant you he was trying to make a (quaint) philosophical point.

The point I have been trying to make all along is that all of this is troublesome in terms of theory. If this is supposed to be a best-selling novel, the detailed suppositional anthropology (which even this hardened stefnist had a little trouble decoding) is going to baffle the mundanes. Since the ending makes no sense without at least a little understanding of it, one would think this a counterproductive feature. Then, if *Footfall* is supposed to sell to any audiovisual medium besides the animated cartoon, the choice of alien physiology has just raised the costume bill by an unconscionable amount, or else we are going to see a movie full of pantomime horses.

Neither Niven nor Pournelle are in the least unintelligent, uneducated or impractical. One presumes they sat down with the full intention of creating what Del Rey is selling. Similarly, if there is a smarter book merchandiser than Judy-Lynn del Rey, that person must get up very early in the morning. What, then, is this? Why are the aliens complicated beyond the comprehension of the shopping-mall average, and why don't they look like something you could push readily onto a soundstage once you had painted it green? It would make absolutely no difference to 90 percent of this text, and would, in any terms with which one grapples at best-seller dom and its ultimate objectives, be a hell of a lot "smarter."

But perhaps not. Perhaps an executive decision has been reached that as long as the book sounds like it has a rationale, most of its natural readers will be content, since they probably can't follow *any* scientific rationale. What they want is the action, and as long as that never lets up, everything will be Jake. Meanwhile, there's no reason not to also do good SF bits. And, for insiders, the inside jokes as well. As for the unphotographable aliens, well, they're certainly alien-looking, so they fulfill a recognition-function for the mall-mundanes

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and thus probably front-load significant bucks into the expectable total. Also, when viewed in a certain light they're cute, so when their menace needs to be defused in the end, there's no problem similar to the one you'd have with Wells's or even George Pal's wet, leathery arthropods. Meanwhile, speaking of movies, no one is leaping up to buy film rights to sci-fi best sellers as distinguished from original scripts; not since *Dune*.

So this whole book may in fact be a cold exercise in the making of something to measure, with no accidental defects in it; it may thus become quite significant in hindsight, bellwether of an approach based, for the authors' part, on experience with *Lucifer's Hammer*, and on Judy-Lynn's with the myriad factors forever mutating fresh in her mind each day.

But while this may be true in some sense, it cannot be altogether and exclusively true. The SF parts are too fondly done, often too thoroughly done, to meet any merely mercantile requirement. Perhaps they were trying only to impress each other, but if so there was a shrewd appraisal of what really mattered; what was really important, what would be the meaningful place to be impressive in. That place is the same as the place in many of us.

They are fans; Niven and Pournelle are fans, and I suspect Judy-Lynn is, too, and I think a lot of what's in this apparently shrewd book is there for the love of it, and for the pride in doing it.

One can only hope, therefore, that *Footfall* does very, very well. Because it would mean you could do genre best-sellers at least parts of which were uncounterfeitable.

In an announcement ceremony held at Norwescon, in Seattle over the St. Patrick's Day weekend, William Gibson's Ace Books novel, *Neuromancer,* won the Philip K. Dick Award for best U.S. original paperback of 1984.* At this writing, it also looks like a shoo-in for the Nebula as best novel, period, of 1984. It may get a Hugo as well.

This accumulation of certificated good opinion will undoubtedly mean a considerable amount of money to Gibson at least until his second or third novel proves a flop — which occasion, I hasten to add, seems very unlikely. Gibson is truly, thoroughly gifted and clearly has no loathing for

**The prize is a certificate lettered and engrossed by Corinna Taylor, plus a $1000 check inscribed by the treasurer of the Philadelphia Science Fiction Society, which administers the prize fund. Runner-up Kim Stanley Robinson's* The Wild Shore *brought him $500 and a Taylor certificate with the PKD emblem done in silver as distinguished from gold. Thus, both winners this year were Terry Carr-edited Ace Specials (and so was at least one other strong finalist, Lucius Shepard's* Green Eyes*). All three were first novels, that being an Ace Specials criterion.*

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hard work, either. He is also gaining considerable status in SF literary/academic circles. The best respectable opinion is that he is, indeed, respectable, and while that cuts little ice with paperback distributors, it eventually leans enough weight on editors so that they push harder on their publishers' marketing staffs, and that, eventually, does affect the thinking of the people who actually put the product up on the shelves. Particularly, of course, if it's coupled with the phrase "award-winning."

What is not clear is whether Gibson set out to partake of this merchandising process or whether he simply had some personal reason to write a good SF novel. My point is that we do not have to know this, but the fact that we can wonder about it is a comment on our climate.

Neuromancer is a cracking good SF book, and an uncommonly ingenious one, evidently written by someone who is both literary and aware of contemporary technical thinking. It was the third of the new Ace Specials, and having reviewed its predecessors, *The Wild Shore* and *Green Eyes,* I passed over it in favor of other things. It was clear to me that plenty of other people would be telling you about it.

But now, for those of you who will only now take it up because it's being certificated, here's the sketch:

Case is a cowboy; that is, he plugs into computer networks and perceives a landscape and an architecture of data, whose topography he roams. Stores of information are palpable structures to him, and by tippytoeing up to them, bamboozling their security systems, slipping inside and bugging them or burglarizing them or both, he gains the loot he retails to ready buyers in the smoking, clicking, neon-shot raucous world of the near future.

It's a road novel. Degagé, existentialist and wasted, Case blunders through life, taking heavy hits, toking up to balm the wounds, plugging into all sorts of things but never himself. At that, he's among the most human characters in the book.

Down and burned out, he's hauled from the gutter by a mysterious entrepreneur who turns out to be an almost wholly fictitious personality machine-conditioned onto a disastrously traumatized and now mercenary officer. Case's assignment is to penetrate an artificial intelligence owned by the world's ruling cartel. To do this, he must tour — that is, Gibson wants to show us — one degenerated locale after another. His allies are a cassette of a dead cowboy's personality, various constructs who are not people at all, a psychotic capable of inducing hallucinations, and a girl assassin with mirror eyes, whom Case possibly loves without admitting it, and about whom the psychotic creates sadistic fantasies that hopelessly skew Case's view of her.

Soon enough it becomes clear in

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his carromings from pillar to post that his target is also his director, and that he is in danger of disarming those parts of the artificial intelligence which were built into it to prevent it from becoming superior to humans. The humans in this story being singularly unattractive and/or psychically mutilated, that may not seem like such a bad idea.

The flash-bang pacing of this book, and its kaleidoscopic rotation of settings from one sort of sleaze-arcade to the next, recall the *Bladerunner* film. As far as content goes, it's a logical consequence, intended or not, of my own *Michaelmas* and Robert Heinlein's *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, particularly in that human behavior occasioned by the seven deadly sins is contrasted to the cleanly, conscienceless but possibly self-validating processes of machine thought. But *Neuromancer's* voracity is all its own, and its offhand familiarity with the lexicon of silicon has not been matched among us. Most of all, it's a book that clearly can mean just as much to video game-players as it does to SF readers; excellent, not to say superb SF though it is, it is also in that sense an ultracontemporary database-emulator; may, for some, be their last novel, since their next step would be not to read printing at all. It's interesting to contemplate the possibility that Gibson is not in fact early in establishing a high-water mark for his career. Might he not, before his race is run, be telling stories in media we can as yet only glimpse, for recompenses derived from God knows what forms of enjoyment? If they are sufficiently graphic, they will be sufficiently rewarding even if most of their subtler content booms right by the numb receptors of most of their audience. If they have subtler content. Let us hope then, if we love SF for something more than the generic bombasts, that Gibson and all the other Gibsons love us.

My friend Frank Robinson, besides being author of *The Power* many years ago, and of a good set of shorter stories over the past third of the century, made a bundle in collaboration with Tom Scortia, also an ex-SF writer of notable talent. They did it with *The Glass Inferno,* a shopping-mall book that became half the basis for the *Towering Inferno* film about the skyscraper fire. That was quite some time ago, now, and after that initial goldstrike Robinson and Scortia went on doing disaster thrillers, like *The Prometheus Project* and *The Gold Crew.* These made money, but nothing on the initial scale happened again.

A few years ago, Robinson and a new collaborator, John Levin, tried again. This is a book called *The Great* Divide. It's about the attempted secession of the Western states, under pressure of the oil shortage, and it's a rather good science fiction novel de-

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spite its attempt to be a thriller.

Marketed as a thriller, it fell on its nose. It was written while oil was tight. By the time it was published, the shopping-mall parking lots were full of fenders again, and nobody with any common sense could possibly believe that the East would ever be freezing in the dark, or that the West would resent a government of Easterners who insisted it ship them oil in return for nothing substantial.

The best parts of this book are chilly SF reading indeed. While researching the history of Eastern (mis)management of the West's natural resources, and putting that research verisimilitudinously into the words and actions of a crisply chosen cast of characters, Robinson and Levin in fact wrote a novel that plays as effectively on the SF ear today as it ever might have. As an Easterner, or at best a Midwesterner, who has toured the West and said "Oh, how pretty!" and "Gah, the damned smog!" in equal measure and from equally apportioned ignorance, I was fascinated by the attitudes, and their historical bases, that Robinson and Levin depict. And from that, their extrapolations of what might happen — based on any simple political miscalculaton in our dealings with the Middle East, or even more surely on the fact that the oil will be palpably going, at whatever price, within foreseeable time — are convincing enough to suit anyone apt to be perusing this review.

And it's a naturally attractive SF gimmick, isn't it, a new kind of secession?

Marketed as a thriller, the book did so poorly it hasn't ever even been reprinted in paperback. But then, the wrong editors were looking at it.

Makes you think, doesn't it? Where in fact is the sure fire, and what runner bears its torch through the anfractuosities of what terrain? And who sold him the map?

I would like to say a word on behalf of Lawrence Taylor Shaw (1924-1985), who is survived by his wife, Noreen, and their sons Mike and Steve.

Larry Shaw entered the SF community as a Futurian during the 1940s and never became famous. In the 1950s, he was one of the early editors of *If* magazine before *Galaxy* acquired it as a sister publication; he was afterward founding editor of *Infinity* magazine and of one of our several *Science Fiction Adventures.* This represented a minor percentage of the editorial employments he pursued over a period of forty years.

What ever it was, he could edit it; swiftly and economically, and he did it from Brooklyn to Evanston to Sherman Oaks ... wherever the glamour jobs weren't. Over that course, he bought stories that are still remembered — James Blish's *A Case of Conscience* in the original short version, Arthur C. Clarke's "The Star" — and scores that are not, but include Har-

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Ian Ellison's first story and any number of pieces by people whose names would surprise you. He was a master at nurturing writers; he had a ready plate of food, a handy bottle, and a couch you could sleep on. When I was writing *Rogue Moon,* a book now called a classic of SF, for $1500 over three years, it was Larry who gave me assignments writing for his car and adventure magazines so I could keep it going, and it was *F&SF,* not Larry, that got the first serial rights. He didn't do things for SF people because he wanted to publish SF; he did them because he wanted to read it.

MY FIRST GAME AS AN IMMORTAL

I took the ball from Uriel
and I thought Why
don't he run it himself, I
sure don't have no
terrible flaming sword
but I run it to the left
and there was Hadraniel
who had struck Moses
dumb with awe,
whose every word
looses 12,000 flashes of lightning
and he was muttering up a storm.
Where is my blocking? I thought, but
I run the other way
and there was the great Jim Thorpe, smiling—
you don't fool nobody in Paradise.
So they stopped me behind the line
for a loss of a yard
and the shouts of the Heavenly Choir
poured down from the cheap seats
like a blessing.

—GEORGE ALEC EFFINGER

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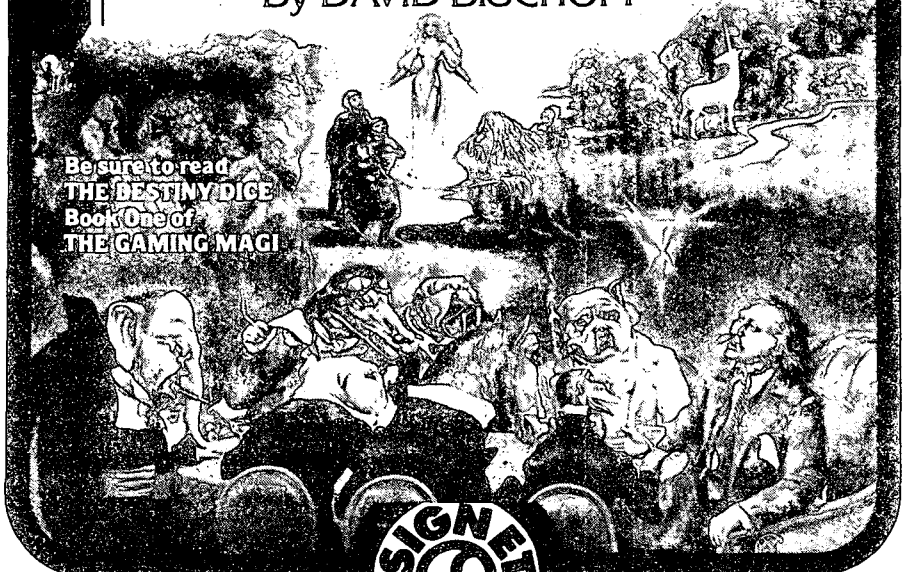
WRAITH BOARD

BOOK TWO OF

THE GAMING MAGI

By DAVID BISCHOFF



SIGNET FANTASY

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James Gunn teaches at the University of Kansas and is well known as a writer and critic of science fiction. He has received numerous awards for his writing (his most recent being the 1983 Hugo Award for Isaac Asimov: The Foundations of Science Fiction*) and specializes in the teaching of science fiction (he is director of the Center for the Study of Science Fiction). "Man of Parts" reflects his background; it is a carefully written, thought provoking tale about luck and how one man may have saved us all.*

Man of Parts

BY
JAMES GUNN

This story begins and ends in a hospital. It is about death and suffering and self-mutilation in a number of unpleasant ways. Christ, you say, who wants to read a story about hospitals and death and suffering and self-mutilation? Well, it is about life and miracles and self-sacrifice, too, and maybe, about the salvation of the world, and if you read it in the right spirit, it will make you feel good about the human race.

It begins, in a way, in 1759 with a book by Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Smith wondered how a man with normal human feelings might respond to the news that a fearful earthquake had swallowed up millions of Chinese. Smith believed that the man would go on with his business or his pleasure as if nothing had happened. But if he were told that he would lose his little finger the next day, he wouldn't be able to work or sleep for worrying about it.

Benny Geroux knew nothing about Adam Smith. In fact, all he knew at the moment about himself was that he was thirty-five years old and his mother was sick. That upset him. His mother was almost never sick, and it was her refusal to be sick that led to Benny's surprising discovery. After months of watching his mother get thinner and paler, Benny finally persuaded her to enter the hospital for tests. They revealed that she had cancer of the liver.

There was no doubt about it. Benny was as certain as if the doctor had held out the traitorous organ to him in the operating room and said, "See? Cancer. There's no hope." Not that he had faith in doctors, but in cause and effect. Benny was allowed to look at the specimen under the

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technician's microscope. It was an unusual courtesy to allow a man with no more stature or powers of persuasion than Benny, but he was a stubborn man and he loved his mother better than life itself.

Many people say that, but Benny meant it. He loved his mother better than life itself. As he sat by her hospital bed while she was sleeping away the postoperative trauma, he looked at her pale cheeks and her gray hair spread upon the white pillow and whispered, "Please, God, take me, not her."

But her breathing continued raggedly in the quiet room. It would stop for long periods when he thought he had lost her, and then it would suddenly start up again. Maybe he was being too passive, he thought, leaving the decision to someone else.

"O.K.," he said to the empty air, and stood up and walked quietly down the redolent corridor. He rode in the elevator to the first floor, walked out to the parking lot, opened the door to his mother's Chevrolet, stuck his finger in the doorjamb, and slammed the door on it.

The doctor who trimmed and sewed the stump said, "You must have been thinking about your mother."

"That's true," Benny said. The moment after he had slammed the door had been filled with pain worse than anything he had imagined. Surely it hurt worse than death. At the same time, his whole being had been swept by a thrill of satisfaction.

When he went back to look at his mother, her breathing was regular and her eyes were open. She recognized his face and smiled. "Benny, I feel better."

He felt a surge of happiness such as he had not experienced in any of his previous thirty-five years. His sacrifice had been accepted. "I'm going to be all right," his mother said. And she was.

Benny would not have thought any more about that matter, other than a periodic thankfulness for his mother's recovery, had not his mother brought up the matter of the astronauts in their faulty capsule. The capsule was *Apollo 13,* the date was April 11, 1970, and the three "juniors" — Lowell, Haise, and Swigert — were hurtling toward the moon in a capsule with a defective power supply. "There they are," his mother said. "They can't do nothing. It's a real pity nobody down here can help them."

Benny nodded and said nothing, but he thought about it. What was a finger to him compared to life for the astronauts and the honor of his country. This time he lopped off the little finger of his right hand in a paper cutter. It was neater and less painful. His mother turned on the car radio as she was taking him to the emergency room at the hospital. They both heard

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the announcement that the moon landing had been canceled but that the crew was safe and the capsule was returning to Earth.

The stinging in Benny's right hand was replaced by a feeling of power. Perhaps the rest of the world was helpless, but he was not. He thought about the other three astronauts who had been killed in a flash fire while their capsule had been sitting on the ground. There had been no warning of that, or he might have saved them, too.

The next opportunity came a few months later. A child was dying of leukemia. Benny didn't know the little girl personally, but she lived in his town and the newspaper ran an article about her disease and her courage. Benny thought she was remarkably pretty. He cut off his left little toe with a chisel while he was working on a model boat in the basement. The little girl made a recovery that had her doctors shaking their heads in disbelief, and people began commenting about Benny's clumsiness.

Even his mother, who seldom noticed Benny's mistakes or odd ways, thought something was strange about it. "Can't understand why you was working down there in your bare feet," she said, shaking her head. "Don't see either how you could get your foot up there."

Benny shrugged. He didn't talk much, and he particularly didn't want to talk about this.

Benny was a dishwasher. He had been a poor student, though he tried hard. His teachers said he had a reading problem, but he read murder mysteries all right. He liked the kind that didn't have violence or blood in them. He thought it was because his mind was logical, and he liked to figure them out.

His father had died before Benny could remember him. His father had been an alcoholic who beat his wife when he was drunk and would have beaten his infant son if his wife had not always interposed her body between them. One evening his father and fallen down drunk on a cold, wet night, caught pneumonia, and died within three days. Occasionally Benny felt a moment of regret when he thought that he could have saved him if it had happened when Benny had become aware of his power.

His mother, Ellen, was a strong woman. She had raised Benny all by herself, without help from anyone. When she was young and not bad-looking, she had worked as a waitress. Later she tended a machine that made envelopes in a greeting-card factory. When the others stopped at a bar after work for a few beers or went bowling, Ellen went home to Benny. Her devotion and his father's death may have made Benny excessively dependent upon her — and made other women seem vain and self-centered by comparison. He had never married. He had never even had a date

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with a woman.

Benny was a master dishwasher. He had a precise blend of speed and thoroughness. He had got his first job in a diner when he was still in high school. When he had dropped out of school at the age of eighteen without a diploma, continuing to wash dishes was the easiest thing to do. Since he lived at home, the pay was O.K.; he contributed most of it to household expenses. Most important, he liked washing dishes. He could stand with his hands in hot, soapy water and let his mind wander; his hands worked better when he didn't think about them. He graduated from the diner to a restaurant and then to the best restaurant in town. The money wasn't much better, but in Benny's field it was success.

Benny wasn't religious. He didn't go to church; he didn't think what the Sunday school teachers tried to tell him was logical. But he had faith. His mind wandered around to that while he was washing dishes. There had to be a reason for things, he thought. That's why there had to be a God. But there were reasons for other things as well. Good and bad luck, for instance. He had considered all the standard superstitions about bad luck and found them inadequate: black cats, ladders, Friday the 13th, broken mirrors, stepping on cracks, knocking on wood — all the possible ways one could incur or avoid bad luck didn't work. He had tried them all. There was a reason somewhere, but he hadn't found it.

The same with good luck. Some people were lucky; some were not, This he had observed over his thirty-five or so years, but he didn't know the reason. It wasn't God, he felt pretty sure. God wasn't arbitrary, giving good luck to people who didn't deserve it and bad luck to those who deserved it even less. And he didn't buy the bit about "working in mysterious ways." There was no reason God should want to be mysterious; in fact, Benny could think of lots of reasons God shouldn't want to be. It was something else, a connection Benny hadn't discovered, something people did or didn't do that made them winners or losers. That is why Benny didn't find strange his ability to buy life for someone else at the price of a part of himself. He had simply stumbled onto the right cause and effect.

Sometimes he wondered whether other people could do it, too. He thought of asking them, but one by one he considered all the people he might ask, and one by one he discarded them. Even his mother might think he was talking crazy, and he knew there was a cause-and-effect relationship between talking crazy and ending up in a mental institution, and people had mentioned that before. What he was doing and thinking now, he felt certain, fell into an area that most people thought was crazy.

Once he hinted at it to his mother.

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"Mama, do you think people can heal other people?" he asked.

"Doctors do it all the time," she said.

"I mean healers. Like faith healers."

"I don't know," she said. "I ain't never seen it."

"What if you saw it?"

"Then maybe I'd believe it."

But Benny decided in the end not to test his mother's tolerance. In any case, he liked having a secret, and he believed his situation was special. No one else did what he could do because no one else could do it. Otherwise, there would be a lot more miracle cures and rescues. Of course it was possible that other people could do it but didn't know about it, or that they knew about it and didn't want to do it. But that seemed so unlikely that Benny discarded the idea immediately. Perhaps because he was so unimportant in other ways, he had been made important in this way. There was a reason for everything.

He couldn't wash dishes for a while after he lost his little fingers, but his boss was understanding and Benny and his mother had some money saved. That plus his mother's social security and small pension paid the bills until his stumps could heal. Four fingers on each hand was not an intolerable handicap. And the bit of pain he endured was more than compensated by a feeling of accomplishment, of doing something for the world that nobody else could do — not even the wealthiest philanthropist — and yes, he had to admit it, a feeling of power.

After the third amputation, life became more difficult. The staff at the emergency room had begun to make remarks, and even his mother accused him of being clumsy when he dropped the old refrigerator onto the little toe of his right foot as they were making room for the new one. That was after news had come of a man and his wife lost in the Rocky Mountains for two weeks; she was discovered in good health in a cabin, but the husband had died of a heart attack before the news about them was released.

Other occasions arose, and Benny had to think of increasingly ingenious methods of self-sacrifice in order to avoid the worst aspects of suspicion. Several cases of too little or too much rain came in a row over the next few years. The Mississippi threatened to flood almost the entire Delta area, but the rains stopped and the river crested lower than expected. An entire population of natives was starving in a drought-stricken area of Africa that Benny had never heard of; it didn't matter to Benny: the rain began to fall. The monsoons failed two years in a row in the subcontinent —wherever that was — but the second year they came unexpectedly late, bringing welcome floods to withering crops. On the other hand, a hurricane bore down on Florida be-

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fore swerving suddenly and harmlessly out to sea.

The local medical community had begun to talk about Benny not simply as accident-prone but as a classic case because of the way his fingers and toes dropped in so regular a fashion. Benny would have varied the order, but each time he had to consider the question of how much the next sacrifice would incapacitate him for simple survival. And then his mother was killed in an automobile accident.

Death was instantaneous. Benny had no fingers or toes left, but he cut off his left hand with a saw. It didn't help. Ellen was dead, and Benny couldn't bring her back. As he bandaged Benny's stump, however, the doctor told him that his mother's liver had been fine right up until the end.

"But, Benny," the doctor said gently, "you're going to have to go into the hospital."

"I don't want to," Benny said.

"But, Benny — you can hardly walk and you can't hold anything."

"I can get by," Benny said stubbornly.

The doctor looked at him suspiciously. "If you lose anything else, you'll have no choice. I'll have no choice."

Getting the United States out of Vietnam took Benny's left foot and put him into the hospital — the psychiatric wing he had always dreaded. But they allowed him a television set, and on it, one day, he saw the assassination attempt on President Reagan. He pulled himself into a wheelchair, and when everybody else was watching the television set in the lounge, he took the freight elevator to the basement, where a repair project was under way and a table saw had been left unattended.

Now Benny was virtually without mobility, and the entire staff was instructed to watch him closely. Though he seemed reasonable enough to talk with, he was, everyone said, definitely and completely round the bend. When the news came of the attempt on the pope's life, Benny had to pull himself out of bed and fall to the floor, then drag himself down the hall to the elevator by one arm to offer his remaining hand to the elevator's descending floor.

The psychiatrist in charge of Benny's case sometimes forgot his professional cool when he couldn't get any answers out of the lump of flesh that was left of Benny. "Can't you give me some idea why you've undergone this crazy program of self-mutilation?" Dr. Frederick asked. He wasn't supposed to use words like *crazy,* but he was past discretion.

Benny shook his head.

"Was it your mother?" Dr. Frederick asked. "Your father's brutality?"

Benny's eyes flickered, but he didn't speak.

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"There had to be a terrible amount of self-hatred to make you cut yourself up this way," Dr. Frederick said.

Benny looked scornful.

"With the world going to hell the way it is," the psychiatrist said despairingly, "surely it doesn't need any help from you."

Benny's eyes moved from the psychiatrist's face to the television set above the doctor's head, where tanks were rumbling in parades and missiles were being raised into firing position.

"It's gonna happen, isn't it?" Benny asked.

It was going to happen, finally, the Armageddon everyone had feared for almost half a century, which Mutually Assured Destruction had finally stopped deterring. Benny knew it as certainly as he had known about his mother's cancer.

"What's going to happen? What?" the psychiatrist asked impatiently.

"That." Benny nodded at the television screen.

"Television?"

"The war. The bombs. The end."

"Maybe."

"I can stop it," Benny said.

"You?"

Benny nodded and began to tell the psychiatrist, calmly, the story of how he had learned about his power and what he had done with it. When he finished, the doctor looked at him for some time in silence.

Finally, he said, "You believe this?"

"It's true," Benny said simply.

"Why haven't you told me this before?"

"I haven't told anybody."

"Why not?"

I figured they'd put me in a mental institution."

"You are in a mental institution."

"I know. Now it doesn't matter." The talking head stuck on the appendageless torso would have unnerved the keeper of an eighteenth-century snakepit.

"And now you think you can stop World War III by means of a similar bodily sacrifice?" Dr. Frederick asked.

"The last one," Benny said steadily. "It's gonna take a big one this time. But I need help."

"What kind of help?"

"I can't get out of bed. You got to hold the knife."

"You must be out of your mind," Dr. Frederick said. He had done it again.

"But, Doctor —!" Benny began.

"Of course I can't do that," the psychiatrist said. "But I can help in another way."

"Yes?" Benny prompted.

"I can have the nurse give you a tranquilizer."

"Not that! Don't you understand? We're all going to die. Better just me than everybody."

"Nurse!" the doctor called.

"Doctor!"

"Nurse!"

Benny struggled on the bed, but it was no use. He could not evade the

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pacifying needle. His past sacrifices had left him helpless. Next morning, however, they found his limbless trunk half off the bed. His head was discovered behind the bed, where it had been removed with surgical precision by the adjustable frame. The head was smiling.

Adam Smith was wrong. Benny Geroux was right. Oh, there was no connection between Benny's sacrifice and the events that followed, you understand, but Benny thought there was, and was willing to sacrifice himself for others. The night he made his final sacrifice, the missiles did not arrive.

Now it's up to us.

"I've been hearing some disturbing things about you!"

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Robert Onopa teaches at the University of Hawaii and has published at least one SF novel. His first F&SF story concerns the odd discovery made by a transport ship's crew that is sent to investigate a possible alien life form...

The Lights

BY

ROBERT ONOPA

As usual, the strobe lights were making his eyes water.

He was sitting in the rec pod, fighting off an incipient migraine, watching the free-dancing and trying to come to terms with what Miika had done to her hair. That's when the announcement came over the ship's intercom. He blinked to adjust to the normal illumination.

"Our long-range probes have registered coherent energy patterns, possible alien forms on the second planet from Sun A5848," Captain Blake was saying, annoyance clipping his words. "Even a transport like us is required to investigate. I regret the delay as much as all you farmers will, and I regret even more" — Blake's sigh of disgust was an audible rush — "that without regular scientific crew, my orders are to put this ship into an orbit around the planet, and to send a shuttle down to investigate with whatever research-certified personnel. . . ."

With the word "delay," Jackson's attention had drifted back to Miika again. She was standing, hip cocked, bouncing slightly to the beat she was keeping in her mind, her shiny bald head swinging from side to side. She had shaved off all of her hair! He had been attracted to her in the first place because of the lush thickness of her tresses, and now they were gone. None of the rest of the women had been affected by the fashion show from Ganymede Colony, the agro planet to which they were being transported, but she'd bought everything on the menu: the silver fingernails, the silver lipstick, the shaved head. Why were beautiful women so shallow? He'd even liked the faint shadow of hair above her upper lip — gone

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now. If he weren't too shy and awkward to free-dance himself. . . .

He was startled by the sound of his own name over the intercom. Everyone in the lounge was looking at him, even Miika, whose eyes had gone wide. The captain had signed off, and now Miika was coming over. Jackson was left with the incomprehensible reverberation of his own name in his head.

". . . of all people," Miika said, smiling warmly, putting her hand on his.

"I didn't hear what Captain Blake was, uh, talking about," he said shamefacedly. "I don't, uh. . . ."

"They're sending a team down on a shuttle to that planet they're getting signals from. You're fourth man on the landing party. Nobody's ever been on that planet before. How utterly...."

"Me?"

"You're research-certified," she said. "You're about the only one."

His heart sank. Now here was something else for him to screw up on the voyage. He was a specialist only in plant diseases. He'd never even been in a download suit before. The music was starting up again, and the strobe started to flash.

"How supra exciting. Wanna free-dance?"

When he stood up, Jackson could see the slight slick sheen on her dome, the dizzying invitation in her eyes. She was wearing silver-tinted contacts. He hung his head and rubbed his throbbing temples. "I better go study up on a download suit," he muttered miserably. "I don't wanna go down there and die."

"Listen," Captain Blake was saying, scratching the blond stubble on his chin, "in two hundred years of looking, no alien life-form bigger or smarter than a dog's been verified, so let's not get excited, right? Jackson? I'm talking to you."

Jackson bounced down in the zero grav of the shuttle, waving his arms for balance. "Just getting used to the suit, sir. I thought it would be, uh, cumbersome."

"Well, there's atmosphere down there, so we're not using helmets. Just make sure you use the 0_2 supplements. And leave all but one of those specimen cases behind. We're not going to stay on the surface a minute longer than the twelve-hour minimum, do you all understand that? I want to get to Ganymede on time and get all those damned farm animals out of my pressurized hold."

Jackson thought he saw the veterinarian who had been conscripted along with him glower, but the flight vane engineer nodded grimly. Before they cut loose, the engineer laid out the data again: The probes had picked up coherent light, patterns that fit the language protocol, multiple moving sources. "So the protocol triggered this look-see," he said, barely a

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flicker of interest in his eyes. "You ask me, an' I told the captain, we're gonna find some weather phenom and a bug in the protocol program."

Just when Jackson thought he had it — his arms one way, his legs another, his trunk in rhythm; if it wasn't exactly a free-dance, it might pass for one —Captain Blake slapped the thruster control with the palm of his hand, Jackson's stomach turned a loop, and he hung on for dear life.

The plain upon which they had landed was dun-colored, rocky, cut by low arroyos formed by erosion, though it was obvious to Jackson that any water had evaporated off the surface of the planet thousands of years before. The clouds were high, pink, wispy. Jackson contemplatively sucked on his supplemental oxygen tube, gazing at the bleak landscape, the line of red bluffs in the distance, considering how he was going to describe the surface to Miika when he got back.

The flight vane engineer had set up the portable computer on its tripod and was fiddling distractedly with the probes, trying to avoid the wrath of Captain Blake, who paced hands on hips, a dark look on his face. A fat reddish sun hung in the sky.

"I don't see any coherent light," Blake muttered. "I told you to put us right in the middle of the set. I don't see a goddamned thing."

"That *is* where I put us," the flight vane engineer said, looking into the steel cone of one of the probes so intently it seemed as if he wanted to crawl inside and hide.

"Well, find something," Blake said, glaring at the men.

Jackson hurried back to the specimen rack he'd set next to the shuttle and shoveled tiny piles of dust onto the trays. The automatic analyzer signified that the dust was, in fact, ferrous oxide, basalt particulates, carbon particles, a hint of quartz. In summary, it was dust. The carbon was promising, but electron micro showed no spores, bacteria, virus. No life.

"I don't see any trace of animal life," the vet told Captain Blake after a short hike around the area. "Except maybe for you, ho ho." He took a swig from a brown unlabeled bottle and politely burped. "Maybe those lights were electrostatic charges in the atmosphere, after all." He leaned back against the starboard landing pontoon, patting it first to make sure that it had cooled, and raised his bottle to his lips again.

"Electrostatic charges. We came all this way to look at the weather," Captain Blake grumbled. "What the hell are you drinking?"

The veterinarian took the bottle from his lips, held it away from his body, and looked at it with a slightly stunned innocence. "I'm, er, sorry, sir. It's a little home brew from the

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farmer's co-op. It's beer."

The flight vane engineer looked up from a tangle of wire beneath his tripod. "I hope you've got more."

"As a matter of fact. . . ."

Jackson saw the bright flashes first: beyond the bluffs, resolving into narrow beams. They spit out a sequence, like a code, then repeated. There were a dozen of them. For a brief moment they reminded Jackson of the strobe lights that illuminated Miika's free dancing, then they were gone.

"Good eyes, Jackson," the vet said, saluting him with a raised bottle.

"We better move up there," the flight vane engineer told the captain.

"This time put us on the right spot."

They had to go through a whole launch rigmarole to get the shuttle up into the bluffs. Jackson watched from the rear port: although the planet seemed to be basically a desert, the bluffs, the ridgebacked mountains beyond, were really very dramatic. They clunked down on a flat spot right where he'd seen the light, right near the edge, with a dizzying view of the plain. But no sooner had they landed than they saw the lights again, this time from a high plateau in the direction of sunset. Captain Blake quickly took his own fix on the spot; determined the source to be stationary, at least while transmitting; and decided that they should move again. At the third site there was enough level ground to keep Jackson's knees from knocking as he hiked around gathering soil samples for his specimen trays. But there was no other evidence that the precise spot was fundamentally any different from the gritty soil a thousand meters away.

"Though I'm uh, finding more quartz, sir, and some mica. Maybe those lights emanate from mineral harmonics somehow. Say some grav or mag pattern sets up a current."

The flight vane engineer, tangled up with his wires under the tripod again, knocked over his beer bottle, already empty. "So where's the complex pattern come from?"

"Could be produced by the crystal structure," Jackson suggested. The vet toasted his hypothesis by raising his third bottle of beer, and Jackson took a deep, satisfied breath. Between the slightly reduced gravity of the planet, the crisp atmosphere of the plateau, and the exhilarating landscape, he felt terrific. "Or the process could have produced a form of life —I mean the light itself could have evolved into a form of life, it's possible, and maybe these different geological features. . . ."

"You've been sucking too much supplemental oxygen," Captain Blake said. "Look, you've got the end of your tube all chewed up."

"Sir?"

Blake and the others followed the focus of Jackson's widening eyes, the

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specimen shovel pointed back toward the plain. There they were again, brilliant points of light stretching into intense beams, sputtering out a strobelike sequence of impressive complexity. The flight vane engineer got a probe turned around, and when the lights shut down, he took a long pull on another beer, dribbling a bit down his chin because he was keeping his eyes on his computer's readout screen.

"Different signal set entirely, Captain," he said. "But it fits, I'll be damned, the same language protocol."

Blake groaned and banged the ship with his fist. He squinted up at the fat red sun, shimmering and huge now that it was so low in the sky. The landscape was turning deep purple, rare shades of scarlet and ochre, the plain striped with almost theatrical shadows. "All right," Blake said. "We're staying here through the planet's night. Right here. Veterinary officer, break out that second case of beer. There's some bedding under the aft deck."

"Sir?"

"What now, Jackson?"

"Do you mind if I sleep outside?" Bright stars were already visible rising on the far horizon, opposite the setting sun. "It would be like, um, camping."

"I don't care what you do. But I'm telling you all this: Unless we turn up something firm, we're taking the data we have and hauling out of here at sunrise. Let somebody else figure it out. I want to make my schedule. I will make my schedule for transport. Understand?"

The vet passed Jackson an open bottle of beer — a dark malt, and very strong. The first swig alone seemed to to give him a headache. He set the bottle down and went to fish out a bedroll.

Only when the sun had fully set did he realize just how bright the stars were — but of course, he thought, gazing upward into the neon twinkle: thin atmosphere, thousands of near suns. There had been no emanations since the last sighting from the plain, and the rest of the crew had polished off what turned out to be a total of three cases of strong beer. Now, hours later, they slept snoring in the shuttle cabin, and Jackson lay on his back, still looking up —it seemed impossible to him that there wasn't intelligent life somewhere — rehearsing some casual way in which he could mention to Miika that he had camped out all alone, braving the unknown.

Again he shut his eyes and tried to sleep. He went over the long day in his crowded mind, could feel the weariness deep in his bones, but before long his legs twitched and his eyes came open again. The sight of the vast dome of the heavens above him, lying as he was among the tiny function lights of the probes the flight

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vane engineer had set out, made him feel suspended in a sea of illuminated jewels. A constellation of blue-white stars directly overhead seemed curiously like the arrays of lights they had seen; they winked rhythmically and reminded him of the strobe lights in the rec pod — and Miika danced into his mind again, her silver shape frozen in time with the music, her breathtaking womancurves, her silver eyes. Miika: the perfect slick dome of her head, her attractively thick lips disfigured by silver lipstick, the marvelous sight of her hips and thighs as she brought her arms back and across, a free-dancing angel.

When he tried to think about something else, he could feel every tiny rock he had failed to clear from beneath his bedding. He sat up and clicked on the emergency light he'd brought along, flashing it momentarily on the shuttle to make certain it was still there.

He decided to slip out of his bedroll and walk around. Once he had stretched and taken a few steps in the brisk atmosphere, his body seemed to tingle and he stopped, setting his arms out wide. In the deep blue void beyond, the air seemed charged somehow, slightly incandescent. Who would see him here? Legs this way, arms that way — yes, that was it, more or less. He rocked his head, his trunk, took the steps again, free-dancing the cone of illumination from his flashlight playing over the mountains in a dizzying rhythm. It wasn't quite right, his rhythm, but he tried, tried again.

Then it was as if the cosmos had exploded, with him at the center.

Jackson was overcome by a brilliance so great he thought for a moment he had been atomized, but no, he could see his feet, his still-dancing feet, colors all around him, through him, in him: yellows and reds and greens and blues of such purity and intensity that he would have fallen to his knees overwhelmed had not a new energy filled him as well, an electricity that seemed to penetrate his spine and discharge in each of his nerve cells. It was wonderful! He was feeling, even as he was thinking all colors are contained in white, and the lights screamed all around him. The rhythm he had been trying to find in his head was in the lights now, it was extraordinary. The light, the rhythm was in his arms, too, his legs, his fingers, his toes — it seemed to penetrate into the very cells of his muscles and nerves, he was the dancer *and* the dance. It was as if new electric blood surged through his heart, and he danced, danced, danced.

The experience seemed to last for hours. He found himself finally a hundred meters away from his bedroll, standing with the single beam of his emergency light shooting off into the darkness. It still moved, ever so slightly, to the new rhythm in his mind, and he felt utterly grand, a new man,

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excited and transformed.

He ran back to the ship and banged on the hatch. "Captain Blake! The lights, the lights!"

He had to bang away for a full three minutes. Finally the hatch popped open and the captain swayed woozily into the hatchway, his flight uniform rumpled, his hair awry, one eye closed. Even from three meters away, Jackson caught the sour odor of his breath. Captain Blake held his head in his hands, groaning.

"Sir, I've seen the lights again."

"Jackson, you scum," Captain Blake croaked, "if you bother me before daybreak, I'll . . . I'll have you executed."

"But sir . . . the lights, they were right here."

"Probes," he heard the flight vane engineer mumble behind the captain. ". . . 'as why probes. Cannu unnerstan'?"

Jackson squeezed his eyes shut in frustration and found he could still see the lights with crystalline clarity, a miraculous rainbow of pink and lime and orange. He snapped his eyes open. "Sir, you don't under—"

"*Ex*ecuted," Captain Blake cut him off. "It's my right." And then the captain slammed the hatch shut with a clang.

At first it frightened Jackson that he could call the lights back when he closed his eyes, but it wasn't hard to get used to the new rhythm in his bones, the new bounce to his step. He considered recording some notes on his specimen analyzer, but he free-danced for a while again. He could swear that his coordination had improved, that his nervous system was responding to some new intelligence. When he lay back down on his bedroll an hour later, wondering if he was too excited to sleep, another wonderful thing happened: the lights in his mind turned pastel, dimmed as if in consideration, and he fell immediately into a deep, sound slumber, the kind of sleep he hadn't had since he'd been hiking to collect new plant diseases as a graduate student.

The crew didn't emerge from the shuttle until three hours after sunrise: Captain Blake's face ashen, the flight vane engineer with his T-shirt on backward, the vet stumbling down the ladder and sprawling cursing in the dust. For a full ten minutes the men communicated only in a variety of debauched moans, relieved only when the vet found one last brown bottle and popped it open with a spasm of his wrist.

"A dop, I meana drop, of the fuel that launched 'ya. Thassa only cure," he said.

"I'm telling you, Captain," Jackson said, "the lights became a part of me. Not ten meters from my bedroll."

"Had to be drunker than the rest of us," Blake growled. "You oughta

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leave that stuff alone. An' stop shouting."

"But sir, if you just check the probes, you'll see. . . ." He wasn't shouting, and what was strange, too, was the new confidence he felt. He'd had an inkling of it early that morning when he'd walked to the edge of the cliff and hadn't been afraid in the slightest.

His explanation was cut short by the flight vane engineer's rapid cursing: he'd caught one of the probe leads in the shoelace he'd been tying and knocked the computer off its tripod. Jackson felt sorry for the man, then embarrassed for him when it turned out that he had connected two of the probes to the wrong inputs before turning in the night before. "Think 'is Jackson did it," the flight vane engineer tried to maintain, but the captain pointed out that the engineer had drunk half a case himself before he'd set the probes. Then the captain demanded the partial data.

"Issinany," the flight vane engineer muttered.

"What?"

"Isn't any," the flight vane engineer spit out. "An' don't shout, please. Tol' you two probes wrong. Crashed all data."

Captain Blake laughed wildly, hysterically. "No data? No data?" Then he abruptly shook his head, his expression flat, and glared at Jackson. "You were hallucinating. That's what you saw, hallucinations. You drank too much."

"No, I didn't, and I wasn't hallucinating. The lights were right here."

"Garg," Blake choked. "Whata we gonna. . . . What time is it?" He tried to focus on his watch, but he'd strapped it on upside down; then he looked up at the huge red sun, already thirty degrees high. The shock of the bright light brought his hands up over his eyes. "Jesus, wonner if I can fly."

"But. . . ."

"Gotta. Behind already." He brought his hands down. His eyes were bleary but the resolution in them was unmistakable. "All of you: Forget what's happened here. Wipe it from your minds. We're packing it in, unnerstan' me? We got a schedule to make. I don' want you sayin' a word about what happened here, or all our asses are cooked."

"Please don' shout," the vet pleaded.

Jackson looked frantically over the plain for a sign of light, but he saw only the dun-colored desert, not a twinkle. The lights were there only when he closed his eyes.

There was a plant he'd seen once, while doing his graduate research in plant pathology, not a diseased plant but a diphrangium with star-shaped blossoms whose beauty had taken his breath away. Even though Miika looked a little funny now — she was

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wearing a cap to hide the stubble until her hair grew completely back, and her eyebrows looked like tiny hedges — she gave him the same feeling those star-shaped blossoms had, an awe at the delicacy of the shape he beheld, a liquid weakness at his knees, an unwillingness to blink lest the sight of her disappear in the instant. She led him over to the large port at the end of the rec pod where other lovers were watching Ganymede grow as they approached, a blue-white world of swirling clouds. The second planet from Sun A5848, the planet the research team had briefly explored, was two weeks behind them.

"You make my toes tingle just to watch you *walk* now," Miika whispered. "And when you dance! Even the other girls tingle all over. Jackson, I'd do anything for you." She self-consciously picked at the last remaining trace of silver polish on her little finger. "I look so ugly. But when my hair does grow back. . . ."

"You'll be even more beautiful than you are now," he smiled.

"You're so nice. The best free-dancer on the ship. I'm so in love with you."

"And I'd do anything for you."

She gazed at the growing planet for a long moment, the fertile globe where they would be spending the rest of their lives together. "Will you tell me what really happened back there? You know when those lights started flashing at the ship, all the farm animals started rutting."

"The data are supposed to be, um, classified," he said, but when she leaned against him and he felt the warmth of her body, he knew he was going to be indiscreet.

"Did the team find a new form of life? Did you communicate with it?"

"Yes, I think so."

"What did it say?"

"Nothing really. It was light, light itself."

"Oh, Jackson."

"Still, I think it was friendly."

She giggled. "All right," she said. "I won't bother you about it anymore. Just so you kiss me at least once every day for the next fifty years. I can't believe I see stars when you do. Stars and rainbows and flashes of color — I thought they just made that up. Nobody ever told me it would really be like this."

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In his latest story for F & SF, *Bradley Denton ("The Music of the Spheres," March 1984), demonstrates that while love can be "tested," it can also be a test ... one that can be failed..*

The Summer We Saw Diana

BY
BRADLEY DENTON

Falling in love with Diana would have been redundant. That was the kind of person she was. That's the kind of people we still are. None of the others could stop, even if I told them about the oscilloscope.

There must be a better way to begin. Where should I start? And to whom should I speak?

If I were Joseph Conrad, I could create a Marlow to tell the story of our summer. He'd have four listeners on the deck of a yawl, and they would discover a whole truth they had only glimpsed before. To Marlow, you see, the meaning would not be "inside like a kernel" but "outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze. . . ."

But I must be my own Marlow, my own Kurtz, my own Intended. And a glimpse of truth has already done enough damage to my potential listeners. They can't see the haze.

So while waiting for Shelby to return from another job interview, I whisper to my warped reflection in the beer pitcher as if it were my secret-sharer. For the deck of my yawl I have the Intersection, where it began. "'And this also,' said Marlow suddenly, 'has been one of the dark places on the earth.'"

The college town of Oread, Kansas, is one of those known beyond the earth.

I was drinking at the bar the first time Diana came in. It was a Saturday afternoon in a humid April, and most of the regulars were here: Jack Tyler, who was working at the plastic cup factory; Shelby Stevens, then about to get her clinical psych degree; Ed Burke and his girlfriend, Laura; Bill Sandwich-and-Tea; Thad Harris; a few

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others. We all looked up when Diana entered.

She wasn't beautiful in her army surplus pants and blue flannel shirt. But something about her caught and held our attention — a slight asymmetry of her greenish eyes, maybe, or the pendular motion of the dark blonde braid that hung to her knees. Or the smile she gave each of us.

As she sat down beside me and ordered a draft, the scent of honeysuckle replaced the Intersection's usual sour-dusty smell. Ronnie, the owner, was bartending, and he poured ten or twelve ounces of beer on the floor before getting the glass under the tap.

Diana looked around at the decaying gray interior. "I've been in Oread since January," she said, "but this is the first time I've noticed this place." Her voice was like the high notes of a cello.

I leaned close so we could talk without shouting over the Grateful Dead coming from the stereo behind the bar.

"It's popular with old hippies and others who never finish anything," I said, extending my hand. "I'm Lawrence Dillon, professional student. Everybody calls me Larry."

"Diana Chandler," she said, and put her hand in mine. An electric tingle told me she was my kind of person.

"Nice to meet you," I said, wanting to hug her.

"'Larry' isn't right," she said. "Could I call you Lawrence?"

How had she known that I secretly like my real name?

My turn was over quickly that evening. First Ronnie leaned over the bar to shake her hand, and then Thad sat down with us. Shelby came up to make sure Diana didn't think we were hitting on her. Jack approached and offered to marry her. And so on.

The only one who didn't like her was Ed's girlfriend, Laura. When Diana held out her hand, Laura pretended not to see. I decided I'd never liked Ed's taste in women.

When I left, most of the others were still enjoying themselves. It was especially good to see Bill Sandwich-and-Tea laughing, because he'd been awfully quiet lately. Shelby thought he'd tried to open his wrists a few years back, and we were afraid he was considering it again.

But now that Diana was here, he seemed to be all right.

I was ashamed to discover that I felt jealous. A part of me already wanted her all to myself.

But Diana would never belong to any one of us. We had to share her, or we'd lose her.

I didn't know that the first night. But I was to be the only one who ever really understood. I was to be the one who lost her for all of us.

The Intersection was closed Sunday, and Monday I had to attend two

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graduate seminars and teach a composition class. I finally made it in a little after five, dying to see if Diana would be back.

She wasn't, but a few of the others were. Shelby sat beside me at the bar and bought us a pitcher.

"Whattaya think, Dillon?" she said, brushing her dark bangs from her forehead and putting on her gun moll act. "We gonna start foolin' around again?"

I made myself smile, then looked at the wet rings on the bar top. Shelby didn't try so hard to be funny unless she was dead serious underneath.

"Well?" she said, making a sound like snapping gum.

I took a sip of beer. It tasted flat. "Dunno, Shel," I said. "I thought you had a thing going with that prof who tortures monkeys."

She dropped the act. "'Had' is right. He cares more about the monkeys than he does me, and he sticks things in their brains."

I remembered the time she'd given me a tour of the prof's lab. I hadn't learned exactly what the project's purpose was, but it had something to do with inducing certain types of behavior by electrically stimulating appropriate brain regions.

What had struck me most about the place, besides the smell, was the contrast between the animals and the machines connected to them. In one corner had been a cage where a macaque with a wire in its skull had masturbated; next to it had been a table with a small glowing screen and a graph printer. The monkey had hooted frantically, and the printer's needle had calmly scratched a jagged red trail.

The research was probably important. But all the same as I sat in the Intersection with Shelby, I was glad the monkey prof was through with her.

She took the pitcher and topped off her glass, then said, "I guess I feel inadequate, what with him dumping me and everybody here nuts for that Diana chick."

I became defensive. "Nobody's nuts for her. She seems to be a loving person, and we're drawn to that."

Shelby leaned to whisper in my ear. "Speaking of which, Bill went down with her Saturday night."

Bill Sandwich-and-Tea was the most asexual person I'd ever known. "I don't believe it," I said.

Shelby made a snorting noise. "Because it wasn't you?"

I was about to ask what the hell she meant when Bill came in and headed toward us. He sat down beside Shelby.

"Sandwich and tea, Ronnie," Bill said, and Ronnie went into the kitchen.

"How's it going, Bill?" Shelby asked, grinning.

Bill grinned back. "Just great." He looked at me. "You left too early the other night, Larry. We had a good

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time. Didn't we, Shel?"

"Not as good as you had later, I'll bet," she said, waggling her eyebrows.

"Jesus, Shelby," I hissed.

Bill laughed. "That's O.K. Everyone knows."

I took a pull at my beer and set the glass down hard.

Shelby put a cool hand on my arm. "Easy," she said softly. She could be that way — caustic or funny one instant, comforting or calming the next. I hated it.

Bill looked troubled. "Is . . . something wrong?" he asked hesitantly.

"No," I said, and refilled my glass.

Shelby took her hand away. "Larry's afraid that his rep as town stud is in trouble."

I smoldered.

Bill watched me with concern in his eyes, and it made me nervous. It was as if our roles had reversed. "Larry," he said, "I'd never do anything to make you feel bad."

"I don't feel bad," I lied.

"I hope not," Bill said. "But if you do, well . . . I needed her." His face was red. "It might not happen again, and it's O.K. if it doesn't. But she made me happy."

There was such wonder in his voice that I couldn't respond. It was as if he'd been reborn.

Shelby's face held an expression that probably matched mine. She hadn't expected anything like this, either.

Ronnie brought Bill's usual ham-and-Swiss with an iced tea, and Bill ate as if savoring the food of the gods.

Diana came in about an hour later, and some of the others swarmed around her as if she were the Messiah.

It bugged me. I began to wonder whether I liked her so much, after all.

Until my turn. When she sat with me and touched my hand, I loved her again. I even forgave her for sleeping with Bill instead of me.

We became addicted. The Intersection hours weren't enough, especially since Diana had "a Wednesday night class" that formed a black hole in the middle of our week. So we began meeting at her apartment after closing.

I loved being at Diana's. She had only a studio apartment, but we were always comfortable. And there was always the chance I might get to stay the night. Always the chance, I told myself.

In most respects, she lived simply. Her bed was a mattress in one corner of the room, and several large pillows served as furniture. Her kitchen appliances were a tiny refrigerator and a hot plate. The only wall decoration was a poster of Einstein riding a bicycle.

In contrast to all that was a few thousand dollars' worth of electronics. She had a tuner, an amplifier, a cassette deck, a turntable, an oscilloscope, an equalizer, and a forty-channel citizen's band radio all stacked on

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brick-and-board shelves between a couple of big speakers. But her record and tape collection was small, and she didn't often play anything when we were over. Sometimes she put on quiet background music, but that was all.

My guess was that an admirer had given her a lot of stuff she didn't really have a use for. It seemed a waste, so one night I had Ronnie bring over some of his albums so we could see what the Dead looked like on the oscilloscope.

But Diana herself was what I was most interested in, just like everyone else. Except Laura, who never came to the apartment. Ed felt torn, but I didn't worry about him.

I worried about Shelby. Throughout May she ate too many caffeine pills and studied almost constantly. I was glad when she finally took off the Tuesday night before exams started and came to Diana's with the rest of us. I was even gladder when she and Diana had a long talk. Shelby needed a friend with more patience than I had when she invariably got around to discussing psychology. As I left, she was telling Diana that behaviorism was inhumane and that B. F. Skinner was a son of a bitch.

I chuckled and closed the door. Shelby'd been a devout behaviorist when she'd been sleeping with the monkey prof.

The next afternoon I went into the Intersection and saw her sitting alone in a corner. I got a beer and went over.

She didn't raise her eyes or speak when I sat down, so I knew something was wrong. Shelby could be warm, nasty, loving, or violent, but she was never merely silent.

I drank my beer and tried not to stare at her.

After twenty minutes or so, she said something I couldn't hear. I had to ask her to repeat it.

"I said," she murmured, "I'm afraid I'm a lesbian."

I didn't know what I'd expected, but that wasn't it. "Oh," I said stupidly.

She looked up at me. The whites around her dark brown irises were bloodshot.

"I'm serious," she said. "I slept with Diana."

A quick pang shot from my stomach into my chest.

It was jealousy.

"Well," I said carefully, "that's no big deal."

Shelby gave me one of her "Thanks a lot, jerk" looks.

"Really," I said. "One, uh, experience doesn't . . ." I wanted to run out and bury myself in a muddy ditch.

"I liked it," she said.

Then I was angry. "Congratulations," I said sardonically.

She looked as if I'd stabbed her in the heart.

What happened was that she came home with me.

We'd had a brief affair before she'd

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taken up with the monkey prof, and it had been nothing more than two friends having fun. But now we made love desperately, as if trying to prove something.

When we finished, Shelby said, "That was nice."

"But not great?"

"I said it was nice, and it was."

So how was it with Diana? I almost asked. Not to be mean, but because I wanted to know.

We lay on our backs. A breeze from the open window blew across us, and Shelby pulled the sheet over herself.

"God damn," she said.

"What?"

"I've got a final in the morning. I should be home studying so I can graduate with honors and get a job. Instead I'm lying in your bed wondering if I'm gay."

I got under the sheet and pressed my face into her right shoulder. I tasted salt.

"Don't," I said into her skin. "Maybe you're bisexual. Maybe you're an asexual who's faking all the way around. But don't *worry* about it."

"Easy for you to say, you male Caucasian heterosexual shit."

I rolled onto my back again and tried to change the subject. "What's tomorrow's exam?"

She was silent for a moment and then giggled. "'The Psychology of Sex,'" she said, and convulsed.

We exhausted ourselves laughing.

It was a moonlit night. When I was finally able to turn toward Shelby again, her body was a smooth, damp shadow with an arc of ivory at the hip.

"What were you thinking about?" she said later.

"When?"

"When your eyes were closed."

My fingers twisted a few strands of moist hair. "You closed yours for a while, too," I said. "Were you thinking about anything?"

"No. Just enjoying you."

"Me, too."

She laced her fingers behind my head and put her mouth close to my ear.

"We're lying." She whispered so softly that I thought I might be dreaming it. "We were both thinking of Diana."

Toward morning we made love again. This time I kept my eyes closed the whole time. Shelby must have, too.

It was wonderful.

Exams were over by the end of May. Diana was still unavailable on Wednesdays, now because she had to "baby-sit" for somebody. I was out of a job since classes were over, but I'd won a small grant to do a research paper on *Heart of Darkness* and *The Secret Sharer* that would get me through the summer.

The days were hot, the Intersec-

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ion's beer was cold, and we all loved Diana.

Sometimes I wondered what her power was. No other woman had been to bed with Thad Harris, who was gay and glad of it. No other woman had made Shelby think she might be gay herself. No other woman had made me want her so much that I was afraid of both of us.

It had something to do with the intensity of her gaze, the openness of her love. . . .

When you talked with Diana, you and she were the only people in the world. I didn't know how she did it, but I had seen it at work. And I had felt it.

But Ed's girlfriend had not. On the first Saturday in June, the day before the accident, I heard Laura say something while Ed was in the Intersection's rest room. She muttered "slut" when Diana walked in and sat at a table with Bill, Jack and Shelby.

I was standing beside Laura at the bar, and my back stiffened. "You say something?" I asked, keeping my voice at a level only she could hear.

She shook her head.

"Yes, you did," I said.

Laura looked exasperated. "Christ, Larry. I know she's a sacred cow, but all I see is a hollow little whore who tells you all exactly what you want to hear. And screws like she's in heat."

For an instant I was stunned. Then I imagined hitting Laura in the face, bloodying her mouth.

I gripped the edge of the bar. It felt slick and hot.

"You incredible bitch," I said. My jaws were clenched so tightly I thought my teeth might break.

Ed's voice behind me said, "What's that?"

He came around to stand beside Laura, and he looked at me with a strange expression.

Laura put her hand on Ed's arm and smiled. "Larry was just saying that life's a bitch."

Ed frowned. Then he said, "Ain't it the truth," and gestured to Ronnie.

He knew what I had really said. I was pretty sure he was beginning to agree with me.

The tension broke a little when Jack came over and invited us to go sailing at the reservoir the next day. He'd already talked to Shelby, Bill, Thad, and Ronnie, and they were all going. So was Diana.

Ed and I said we'd be there. Laura didn't say anything, but she'd be going since Ed was. She'd want to be sure he and Diana weren't together too much.

After Jack went back to his table, Laura asked Ed to take her home. As usual, he paid the tab for both of them.

"Whores charge," I said to the air while Ed was at the cash register at the far end of the bar.

I could feel Laura's eyes on me, and I had to look.

There was no hatred in her face,

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but there was anger and pain.

"Watch out for the ones that don't tell you the price ahead of time," she said, and glanced at the table where Diana was holding Bill's hand.

As Ed and Laura left, I wanted to take the heavy glass pitcher from the bar beside me and heave it at the back of Laura's head. My fingers even closed on the handle.

The Diana came over and touched those fingers, and I felt nothing but love and peace.

Sunday morning was bright. The lake shimmered.

We wondered if it was safe for all nine of us to pile onto Jack's eighteen-foot catamaran. But there was a life jacket for everyone, and Diana, who was holding Jack's hand, said we'd be fine since there was almost no wind.

That settled us. No one wanted to stay on shore when Diana was going to be on the boat.

A nylon-seated aluminum "wing" extended from each hull, so six of us sat on the wings while the remaining three stayed on the canvas between the hulls. Shifting people around when we tacked was difficult, but on the whole there was plenty of room. We enjoyed ourselves for three hours.

Then Laura noticed the greenish black clouds in the southwest.

She pointed them out to Jack, who looked irritated. But with a thirty-foot aluminum mast over us, he admitted, we didn't want to get caught in a thunderstorm.

The nearest place we could land the boat was a mile due south. The waves whitecapped before we'd gone halfway, and then the clouds were over us. It began to hail.

"Tacking!" Jack yelled, and those of us on the canvas ducked as the boom jerked from port to starboard. Marble-sized hailstones rattled on the boat and stung our skin.

Laura shouted something I couldn't hear over the noise of the storm. She was on the starboard wing, clinging to Ed as though she would die if she let go.

Cold water washed over us. Thad fell into the lake.

A violent gust whipped the boom back to port. It hit Jack in the head, and he pitched into the gray water.

As he disappeared, I looked at Diana. She sat on the bucking port wing as if carved from white ice. Her eyes were open wide, and she didn't even wince as the hailstones struck her.

Several of us grabbed at the swinging boom, but there were too many trying to do the same thing at the same time. The boat lurched, and we went overboard.

I came up about twenty feet away and saw a spike of light jump from the mast into the sky.

Diana was the only one still on the catamaran.

What I saw in that instant I was sure I dreamed. Diana's eyes glowed

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red, then green, then diamond blue. Her hair whipped around her like charged wires. White fire blazed from her mouth.

Then the concussion hit like a giant hammer, and the sailboat flipped over.

I tried to scream Diana's name, but my mouth filled with water. I choked and spat, then swam hard for the capsized boat.

A cold terror told me she was already dead.

As if at a command, the hail and wind stopped. The waves began to subside.

I saw Jack bobbing a few yards away from me. His right ear was bloody, but he was conscious.

"Where's Diana?" he shouted.

"She was still aboard when the lightning hit!" I cried.

Jack looked confused and scared. "Lightning?"

"Didn't you feel the thunder?"

"Jesus God," Shelby's voice said a few feet to my right. I hadn't known she was there.

I turned toward her, and then I saw it.

Less than a quarter mile away, a thin, dark funnel licked down from the clouds. As I watched, it touched the water and turned white.

I made for the boat again. Peripherally, I saw Jack, Shelby, and somebody else doing the same thing.

It was pointless. Even as I swam, I could feel myself being drawn backward.

Then I was enveloped in mist, and a current pulled me under. For several long seconds I felt as though I were encased in black ice.

When I surfaced, the funnel was retracting into its cloud mass. But the storm wasn't through with us.

I don't know how it happened; maybe a shelf of rock twisted the currents created by the waterspout. But however it had been created, a whirlpool at least twenty yards in diameter and seven to ten yards deep drew me in and carried me along its upper edge.

The catamaran was at the bottom. The mast rose up every third or fourth turn and sliced back into the water like a knife into soft wax. The mainsail and jib were gone.

Through the mist I saw the others. Four were near the top of the whirlpool, like me, and the rest were lower. But only Diana was with the boat.

The boom ropes were tangled around her legs, and she was being dragged along as the boat spun. Her head and shoulders were underwater almost constantly.

I tried to go to her, but the whirlpool wouldn't let me move downward any faster than it would take me. I thought I might have better luck if I took off my life jacket, but then I looked across and saw that Jack had already tried it. Now he clung tightly to his unstrapped jacket, and I instinctively checked the buckles on mine.

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I heard a shout above the water noise.

It was Laura. She was farther down than anyone but Diana, and she was pointing at the body. I couldn't hear all she said, but I picked out the words "She's drowning!"

I tried to shout back that it was too late, that Diana had been hit by lightning before going into the water, but Laura didn't hear me.

She grabbed a trailing rope and pulled herself toward the boat.

Her thin arms held more strength than I could have imagined. She went down across the current until she was within three yards of Diana's entangled foot.

Then the mast came out of the gray wall and swung down. It caught Laura across the back and drove her under.

She didn't come up.

The water slowed. In fifteen minutes the center of the whirlpool was no more than a dimple where the boat turned lazily.

Diana's perfect shoulders rose from the foam. She floated faceup.

We circled with the gentle current and watched the one we loved open her eyes.

It took the divers three days to find Laura. The funeral was two days after that. It was a week later that Ed Burke slept with Diana for the first time. A Friday.

And that was why, as I tried to feel sorrow in the weeks following Laura's death, all I really felt was jealousy.

I had to remind myself that Diana loved me as much as anyone. She belonged to all of us, and I could live with that. As could the others.

Except Ed. After that Friday, he kept her hand in his at the Intersection. Whenever others sat with them, he glared and sulked.

For him, making love with Diana hadn't been the freeing experience it had been for Bill. Instead, he had seen it as meaning that she would take Laura's place.

She did spend extra time with him for a while. But by mid-July she was returning to her old patterns, and Ed began to realize he was no more important to her than anyone else was.

He couldn't accept it. He had to be the center of her universe, as he had been for Laura.

On a Wednesday evening in late July, I sat with Shelby in the Intersection and told her what I saw happening, hoping she would know how to prevent the coming crisis. But when Ed came in, I knew it was too late.

His hair was greasy and tangled, and his face was covered with dark stubble. His eyes were wide and watery.

"Anyone seen that bastard Jack?" he shouted. "And where's Ronnie?" His lips pulled back from his teeth. "The son of a bitch waited until I went home!"

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Ronnie was in the kitchen, but none of us said so. Ed pushed Thad out of his way, went behind the bar, and slammed a pitcher down on the Grateful Dead album that was playing on the turntable.

Ronnie came out, and Ed swung the pitcher into his right temple. Ronnie spun and fell.

"You were with her Sunday!" Ed screamed, and raised the pitcher again.

I ran and landed with my chest on the bar top, then reached up and grabbed Ed's wrist. He lost his grip, and the pitcher smashed on the floor.

I rolled away as he struck at me. Then I saw that Jack had come in.

Ed jumped over the bar and got his hands on Jack's throat.

"You killed Laura!" he shrieked. "I won't let you take Diana, too!"

Shelby pulled at his arm, and he elbowed her in the ribs. But he let go of Jack.

I got Ed in a bear hug. Jack leaned on a pinball machine and coughed.

"You've been with her!" Ed cried, struggling. "I saw your car! And now she won't answer the door!"

"Ed, this is Wednesday," Shelby said. "She's not home on Wednesdays."

Ed began screaming incoherently.

Then Thad's voice boomed, "Call an ambulance!"

That distracted me, and Ed stomped on my right foot. Even before the pain hit, he had twisted free.

Jack dodged away, but Ed didn't notice. He kicked over a table and stumbled out of the intersection.

Bill Sandwich-and-Tea came out of the rest room. "Hey," he said mildly, "what's all the noise?"

"Ed went crazy," Jack said hoarsely.

I limped toward the door. "We'd better go after him before he gets hurt."

Shelby stopped me. "We have to help Ronnie," she said.

Ed, her eyes told me, was past any help we could offer.

At the hospital the police asked how Ronnie had been hurt. There was no way to avoid telling them about Ed.

I wish we had done it sooner.

Shelby, Jack, Thad, Bill, and I had been in a hallway about two hours, waiting to hear about Ronnie, when they brought Ed in.

They took him right past us. Blood got on Shelby's purse on the floor.

Jack began making soft sounds in his throat, and he and Shelby cried. Bill wandered down the hall. Thad swore.

I went outside to get away from the odor of antiseptic. It was a hot night, and clouds of insects formed halos around the lights shining down on the parking lot.

A policewoman leaned with her elbows on a metal railing, smoking a cigarette and muttering.

"Goddamn crazy," she said. "Stupid, stupid."

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I asked if she knew what had happened to Ed.

Apparently, he had wandered around Oread on foot after leaving the Intersection. Wandered around and walked through windows and glass doors.

The policewoman had found him at the last place, after he'd fallen. His last words before losing consciousness had been: "Diana. I saw you."

"You knew him?" the cop asked.

I nodded.

"O.K., then," she said. "Who's Diana? Some girl who dumped him?"

"I don't know," I said.

The cop looked at me skeptically and then turned away to puff on her cigarette. She exhaled smoke and said, "The doctors don't think he was doped up, but we still ought to question this Diana."

"Why?"

She stubbed out the cigarette on the railing. "To find out why he did it."

"I doubt that he knows that himself."

The cop looked at me again. "Wrong tense. They gave up on him a few minutes ago."

I went back inside and told the others.

After another hour, a doctor said that Ronnie had a concussion and would have to stay a few days. We could visit him the next afternoon.

Thad and Bill left with Jack. I rode with Shelby, and she drove as though driving were the most important thing in the world. I knew it kept her focused away from what wanted to eat her alive from the inside out.

"Stay with me tonight?" she asked at a stoplight without looking at me. Her eyes searched the intersection.

I couldn't answer because of what I kept thinking.

"Somebody has to tell her," I said.

The light turned green, and Shelby accelerated slowly. "It's Wednesday," she said. "She's not home."

"It's not Wednesday anymore. It's at least one o'clock. Let's go."

"No," Shelby said.

"Why not?"

She pulled over to the curb.

"Because I need her now," she said. "That's what happened to Ed. He needed her too much."

"You can wait outside."

"I won't. You'll stay with her."

I put my left hand over her right. She was clutching the steering wheel so tightly that her knuckles felt sharp. "I've wanted to before," I said, "and I haven't."

"This time you'll need her. And you'll stay."

A car went by, and its headlights showed me that Shelby needed to cry but was stopping herself. She took us back into the street and drove to Diana's.

I rang the buzzer for several minutes and was about to give up when

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the hallway's single bulb burned out. Only then did I see the flickering at the bottom of Diana's door.

Pale green licked out and made my shoes look phosphorescent.

I pressed my ear against the door. Something inside hissed.

I told myself it was the sound of leaking gas. If I had believed it, I would've kicked in the door. Instead I fumbled in my wallet for a credit card and used it to pop the latch.

There was no stink of gas as I entered the room and closed the door behind me. The only smell I was aware of at first was the pleasant, sweet scent of Diana.

Then I saw that the green light came from the oscilloscope, and I smelled something intermingled with the sweetness. Something like warm plastic and metal, like a television or computer.

For a long moment all I could see were the green waves and spikes that danced across the circular oscilloscope screen. Then my eyes adjusted, and I saw Diana's silhouette. She was sitting cross-legged on the floor beside the shelves of stereo equipment.

I took two steps toward her, then stopped as another weak light came into view.

The red numerals had been hidden by her body, but now I saw that the CB radio was monitoring Channel 31. The hissing sound had been static.

But there was no sound now. The line on the oscilloscope danced in silence.

I took another step, and the line went flat. The CB emitted static. Diana did not move.

The room was cool, but I was sweating. I felt as though I were in a dream.

"Diana?" I said, and the static stopped. The green line jumped again.

My first thought, like a dream-thought, was that the static and the glowing line were connected to my actions. I took another step. Nothing changed. "Ed died tonight," I said, and still nothing changed. The line rippled, and Diana sat as if frozen.

Just as she had during the storm.

Fire had come from her eyes and mouth. Fire like the white of the lightning, the green of the oscilloscope, the red of the CB's channel indicator, and the blue of —

I shook my head to get away from dream-thought. There was no blue.

I went to Diana and knelt beside her. "It's Lawrence," I whispered.

Green washed over the left half of her face, leaving the right in shadow. Her left eye stared.

"Why are you like this?" I asked. "Did Ed —"

Static hissed and startled me. That sound, I realized, meant that the radio was in the receiving mode. I looked away from Diana for a moment and saw that the oscilloscope displayed a flat line again.

I took Diana's cold face in my

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hands and turned it so I could see both eyes. She didn't seem to feel me.

I ran my hands down her neck and shoulders, then grasped her upper arms and shook her.

She was an ice sculpture.

"Diana," I whispered. "Please. I need you."

My fingers slid down the thin cloth covering her arms. I needed our hands to touch as they had so many times in the Intersection. I needed to know she was still our Diana.

Then I felt the plastic-coated wires. They entered the back of each of her hands behind the knuckles of the middle and ring fingers.

I stared at the twin green lines reflected in her eyes as my fingers probed. Ed and Laura were dead, Ronnie was in the hospital, and the woman I loved, the woman we all loved, had wires in her.

Wires.

I thought of the monkey prof.

The static cut off abruptly, and the lines in Diana's eyes resumed their dance.

I brought her right hand close to my face.

A flap of skin was peeled back, and two strands the thickness of fishing line disappeared inside, where tiny blue lights gleamed.

When the static came back, the blue lights winked out. I looked at her left hand and saw that they were there now.

I traced the wires from Diana's right hand and found that they plugged into the oscilloscope. Other wires led from the oscilloscope to the CB, and two wires led from there to the left hand.

A rational demon worked without my will and told me that when the green line danced, the oscilloscope was taking signals from the right hand and feeding them to the silent, transmitting CB. When the line was flat and the CB emitted static, the left hand was receiving signals from elsewhere.

I remembered the masturbating monkey and the machines that had recorded its brain's feeble energies.

And I ripped the wires out of Diana. Sparks jumped from the holes.

Her eyes burned red, green, and blue. A white flame shot from her mouth.

Then the room was dark and silent. The oscilloscope and CB lights had gone out.

The smell of plastic and metal lingered.

I groped at the wall until I found the light switch. The dusty globe on the ceiling gave off a dull yellow glow.

Diana lay on her back, her eyes closed. I propped up her head and shoulders with a pillow, then knelt and watched her. I couldn't think of anything except the lab and its monkeys, and my memory of the stench began to overpower the real-time

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smells of Diana and her equipment.

She opened her eyes and smiled.

"Lawrence," she said in the clear voice I loved.

I touched the skin behind her knuckles and felt no seams. Her hands were warm.

"We've waited so long," she said.

Her left hand touched my cheeks and lips, then stroked my hair.

I met her open mouth and tasted honeysuckle.

She undressed us. Her touch was unerring and loving; her mouth soft and sure. The fingers of her right hand intertwined with those of my left.

"You hurt," she breathed. "When you hurt, you don't know what's right or wrong, real or unreal. Let me take away the hurt."

They were words I needed to hear, and I nearly cried out as I moved toward joy.

She touched me as I wished, let me touch her as I wanted, combined words and flesh in a perfect, delicious —

The rational demon stirred and sent me a thought like a stab of lightning into a storm-whipped lake:

No reality could be so like my fantasies. There is always imperfection, in anything, in everything. . . .

As I kissed Diana's throat and breasts, I realized that her right hand still clasped my left.

She whispered, "I won't let go of you. Not now. Not ever."

I pressed my mouth against her skin and tried to melt into her.

The demon's lightning returned:

Again she has said and done precisely what I wanted, precisely what would erase my fear.

"We've become one," she said, sliding her left hand down my spine.

It was good, it was real. . . .

The honeysuckle went away for an instant.

A hundredth of a second. Less.

My tongue tasted warm plastic and metal.

I tore my mouth away, put my right hand on her breastbone, and tried to push free.

Her right hand kept my left imprisoned.

I got to my feet and pried at her fingers.

"Lawrence," she said. "I am you."

She reached up with her free hand and touched me.

Almost, I let myself have what I wanted.

Then the demon ripped through my desire. I stumbled backward into the wall and leaned there half-crying as pain throbbed up my arm.

My left hand was paralyzed, claw-like, as Diana had held it.

Bits of bloodless skin were caught in the fingernails.

"So it must end," a clear, sweet voice said. "It'll be good to be in my own body again."

I looked from my hand to Diana.

Naked, she knelt on the floor in

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front of me, her hands palm-down on her thighs. Ragged tears marred her right hand, and a blue spark flashed inside.

The perfect woman, the goddess, stood. My right hand reached for her again.

She ignored it. "I meant to stay longer for the sake of completeness," she said, "but I'm told my data has been sufficient." She went to the shelves of equipment. As she stooped to retrieve the wires, she glanced at me. "I suppose you'll go mad now. You're all so close."

I didn't feel as though I were going mad. I had been on the brink of joy and had pulled away. There was nothing left to feel.

But the rational demon was not dead. "That's what happened to Ed, isn't it?" my voice asked. "He was here tonight and saw you."

Diana plugged wires into her right hand. "He left just as I became aware of him. When I'm in contact, I can't pay much attention to anything else. That's why I scheduled my reports at weekly intervals. If nothing else, you tend to respect your clocks and calendars."

If I had been able to feel, I would've felt anger. "He loved you," I said.

She plugged wires into her left hand and shook her head. "My findings are clear. Except for rare individuals, you respond only to behavior keyed to your own wishes. You 'love' only what serves you. Surprisingly little progress has been made since the last survey."

I began to feel something now: a dizzying confusion, as if I were being drawn into a cold whirlpool. "When was that?"

Diana flipped switches on the oscilloscope and CB. "It can't matter to you."

"It matters," I said, not knowing why.

Diana sat cross-legged and looked at me with an expression that was almost pity. "A few dozen of your lifetimes ago."

My left hand twitched, and the rest of my body shuddered in response.

"Why here?" I murmured. "Why us?"

She adjusted one of the wires in her right hand. "Yours was only one of the groups in this sample. If it's any consolation, no other group has fared much better than yours." She seemed to hesitate. "Or much worse."

I walked toward her and heard blood squeezing through the vessels in my head like static, like hissing.

"I'll tell them," I said, kneeling before her.

"For what purpose? Besides, by the time you can say anything, I'll be gone."

Her left index finger paused over a button on the oscilloscope.

She gave me the smile that had made us love her. It was tinged with

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something we hadn't seen the first time.

"I'm sad for you, Lawrence," the cello-voice said. "If you were capable of truly loving me and mine, we'd be more than willing to love you as well."

Her finger touched the button, and her arm dropped to her side.

The whirlpool roared.

I wanted to shout my hate, but no sound would come from my mouth. I wanted to rip out the wires again, but my hands wouldn't move.

I don't know how long I looked into her empty eyes. The sun was up by the time I found myself standing on the sidewalk outside. My left hand was sore but unparalyzed. I had managed to dress myself. I managed to walk away.

That afternoon I was told that Bill, Thad, and Jack had gone to Diana's at 8:00 A.M. to tell her about Ed. The apartment door had been open, and there had been nothing inside but the poster of Einstein and his bicycle.

The Grateful Dead are singing their last songs of the evening, and it's time to make an end.

Again, if I were Conrad, I'd conclude with a perfect metaphor. I'd have my Marlow and his listeners look out from the deck of the yawl and see that "the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed somber under an overcast sky — seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness." Or, if I felt optimistic, I'd have my narrator see his secret-sharer, his second self, transformed into "a free man, a proud swimmer striking out for a new destiny."

But the ends of the earth are both too far and too near for our story. Oread is only a tiny piece of the earth, yet it's played a part in the judgment of the whole. As for a new destiny — how can I describe a self as "a proud swimmer" when it's struggling to float?

I know it's poor tale-telling to invoke another's stories. But I've clung to my Conrad research as Shelby clung to her steering wheel the night Ed died, as a man in a whirlpool clings to his life jacket. Besides, my funhouse pitcher-image, although I've drained your gold and left you with foam-flecks, you're an indulgent listener. You don't require me to judge as Conrad required Kurtz to judge. We won't whisper of "the horror."

Still, a storyteller has a duty, and I don't want to fail you. If I were a classicist, I might now portray Laura as Cassandra, whose prophecies were true but never believed. Or Ed as Actaeon, who was changed into a stag and torn apart by his own hounds after he saw a naked goddess.

Forgive me. I'm slightly drunk, and I'm not a classicist, anyway.

As it is, then: A monkey doesn't know why he has a wire in his brain,

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and it would be no easier for him if he did. When I see Thad going through lover after lover and hating them all, Jack getting stoned and losing his job, Ronnie forgetting his name, and Bill staring at his wrists, I can see no point in telling them why Diana left us.

If I did, and they could understand, they'd only realize that our loss had nothing to do with how little she really loved us, and even how little we love each other. It had to do with how much we love ourselves.

Shelby has just come in. I hope she got the job, because she needs another focus, another life jacket, just as I do now that I've finished the paper. For me, the fall semester will begin in three days, bringing the summer to an end. For her, something else will have to serve.

I've moved in with her, and we've bought thick drapes for the bedroom windows. In the night, neither of us can know if the other's eyes are open or closed.

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Installment 10: In Which the Fabled Black Tower Meets Dune With as Much Affection as Godzilla Met Ghidrah

Synopsis of Part One of this thrilling essay:

The critic attemped to establish, as philosophical background for weighty matters to be discussed in Part Two, that an ambiance or derangement surrounds the milieu known as Universal Studios. Then, when the reader felt secure that the critic was going to discuss lunacy at the fabled Black Tower of Universal, he jerked them around again, as is his wont, by veering away in a (seemingly) unrelated digression that detailed the fifteen year frustration of those who have attempted to bring Frank Herbert's *Dune* to the big screen. The critic made much of the expectations of the filmgoing audience; their Cheyne-Stokes respiration at the merest mention of the magic name *Dune;* the universal (though as we will see, not Universal) belief that this was one of the most mythic, most exciting, most eagerly-anticipated films of all time. Absolutely. Early on in Part One, the critic made this cryptic remark:

"Yes, I think *deranged* is the proper adjective, particularly when Universal makes a corporate decision to scramble all its eggs in one basket. *Dune.*"

What could this have meant? At

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what dark secrets was the critic hinting? Did he, in fact, begin to tie together the disparate elements of Part One with this pair'o'paragraphs:

"Four years later *Dune* was a reality; more than forty million dollars had been expended in its production; the world trembled at its imminent release; and in mere moments before it hit the screens of the world, everything hit the fans in that equally fabled black Tower where derangement is a way of life.

"And in the next issue I'll bring you full circle, as one with the Laocoönian serpent, to complete the bizarre story of Frank Herbert, *Dune,* De Laurentiis father and daughter, untold millions of dollars and lira, and the strange rituals of the priests of the Black Tower."

Now go on, simply all atremble, to the thrilling Part Two!

There will be mass screenings of *Dune*. There will be no mass screenings of *Dune*. There will be several sneak previews of *Dune,* but only on the West Coast. There will be sneak previews of *Dune,* but only in suburban New York and Connecticut. We are running screenings of *Dune* for the press at Universal only for the first two weeks in December, prior to the December 14th nationwide release. All press screenings of *Dune* have been cancelled. A screening has been set up, but only those press representatives with specially-accepted credentials will be invited. The special press screening for an elite group has been cancelled. Yes on *Dune*. No on *Dune*. *Dune's* in, *Dune's* out, surf's up!

Those are notes from my log book of daily appointments. They begin in mid-November of last year, and they go right on through to December 12th when I actually got to see *Dune*.

If the word *deranged* echoes in that paragraph of windy contradictions, well, who're ya gonna call, Ghostbusters?

As I write this in March of 1985, *Dune* has come and gone, and you have very likely seen it. Some of you liked it; some of you didn't like it. Apparently, not one of you was satisfied.

In the time-honored tradition of now-crepuscular fan pundits — so crapulously into their twilight years that their declamations no longer girn from the pages of know-it-all fanzines — every aficionado endowed with mouth has had his/her scream. It was too big. It wasn't enough. It left too much out. It included too much. It was simplistic. It was too convoluted. It was too serious. It wasn't serious enough. *Dune's* in, *Dune's* out, surf's up, shut your pie-hole!

Can't anybody see there's something wrong here?

Doesn't anybody else notice that otherwise rational critics have savaged *Dune* way the hell out of proportion to its weaknesses? Even Roger Ebert,

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former SF fan and good film observer, picked *Dune* as the worst film of the year. The same year that gave us *Chil-Children of the Corn, Porky's II, Teachers, Gremlins, Body Double, Conan the Destroyer, Buckaroo Banzai, Streets of Fire, Breakin' 2 Electric Boogaloo, Sheena, Where the Boys Are, Up the Creek, Sahara, Tank, Red Dawn, Rhinestone, Hot Dog...The Movie, Angel, Bachelor Party, Bo-lero, Hardbodies,* and *Give My Regards to Broad Street.*

In such a year of gasp, wheeze, pant, choke, gimme a sec to let my gorge settle, in such a year *Dune* is the worst film!??!

No, gentlefolk, something went wrong. Of a nature that has to do with public and private perceptions. Of a sort that defies logic because, like politics, it is a matter of image. Codification of what happened, of the skewing of expectations, progressed so rapidly and with such economy of action, that if one were given to conspiracy theories one might well take the case of the release of *Dune* to one's bosom for the sheer clarity of its *modus operandi.* But let me, for an instant, give you a f'rinstance. Helpful digression. Explanation by example. A bit of storytelling.

William Friedkin is, in my view, an extraordinary director. There is a subterranean river of dark passion rushing wildly in the subtext of all his films — successful and disastrous — that clearly marks him as an artist almost manic with the need to rearrange the received universe in a personal, newly-folded way. With only two films, *The French Connection* in 1971 and *The Exorcist* in 1973 (neither, in my view, Friedkin's most compelling work), he established himself as the box-office Colossus of Roadshows.

Then he took four years to bring forth an astonishing film called *Sorcerer.* An honorable (and acknowledged) *hommage intense* to Clouzot's 1952 classic *The Wages of Fear,* Friedkin's labors and vision in the jungles of the Dominican Republic — which came close to killing him, so physically close to danger did his pathological involvement force him — produced a motion picture that laid bare the corpus of human compulsion with images that smoldered.

The film died. It was driven into oblivion to such an extent that nowhere in Pauline Kael's five books of criticism is the movie even mentioned. And the core reasons for its universal (and, not surprisingly, Universal) dismissal can be found in *Sorcerer*'s listing in HALLIWELL'S FILM GUIDE, the basic reference work on cinema (page 761, 4th edition):

"Why anyone should have wanted to spend twenty million dollars on a remake of *The Wages of Fear,* do it badly, and give it a misleading title is anybody's guess. The result is dire."

Dire? *Dire*!?! Halliwell does not bristle thus at the vile and venal re-

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makes of *Stagecoach, King Kong, Cat People, The Jazz Singer, The Thing, The Big Sleep* or the 1981 remake of *The Incredible Shrinking Man (Woman)* as a vehicle for Lily Tomlin, even while acknowledging their failure. But *Sorcerer* produces uncommon bile in the usually mild-mannered Leslie Halliwell.

And while my theory of movie crib-death may be all blue sky surmise as regards *Dune,* so close to the immolation, we can use Kael and Halliwell as indicators of why Friedkin and *Sorcerer* were summarily dismissed after uncommon savaging, and extend the premise.

It was expectation and image. *The Wages of Fear* was a classic. Friedkin was considered a Johnny-come-lately, a smartass who had done spectacularly well with "popular" films. By what right did this upstart manifest the hubris to reshape a film held in worldwide esteem? That he made the movie not only with the blessing of old Clouzot, but with the onscreen dedication to what had inspired him; that he made the film at the highest level of professionalism and expertise, rather than at the level of graverobbing commercialism that keynotes 99% of all remakes... cut no ice with the critics. They were lying in wait for Billy Friedkin. And they ambushed him. So much for expectation.

Image. The title of the film was *Sorcerer.* For those who paid attention to the film, that was the name of the truck driven by Roy Scheider; and it was the recurring trope treated both visually and mythically throughout the picture. But Bill Friedkin was, unfortunately, the director of *The Exorist,* and theatergoers went to the movie expecting a hair-raising action-adventure of doomed men on the run, condemned to a suicidal job. Audiences felt betrayed. The image of the film that had been projected by its title and the resonance with Freidkin's most popular movie, *The Exorcist,* linked with the *a priori* animosity of the critics; and *Socerer* had about as much chance of succeeding in the marketplace as Ilse Koch designer lampshades from Buchenwald.

Worth was evaluated not on intrinsic merit, but through skewed expectations and a misleading image.

The studio that dumped *Sorcerer* was Universal. Studio of Black Tower, where derangement is a way of life.

In October of last year I was approached by *USA Today,* the national newspaper, to write a visiting critic's review of *Dune.* As I was already the film critic of record for the *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction;* I received press screening notices regularly; as I was on good terms (in this symbiotic relationship) with the pr people at Universal; as I had discussed the upcoming film with Frank Herbert and he had advised the publicity people that I'd be doing a critique; as *USA Today* is a major market for na-

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tional film publicity and attention by a wide spectrum of potential ticket-buyers; as all of us in the reviewing game had been led to believe *Dune* was going to get a big push from not only De Laurentiis but from Universal as its distributor, I felt sure I'd be able to take my time with the piece. If the movie was scheduled to open on December 14th, then surely I'd see it later in November.

But strange things began happening in the Black Tower.

It was widely rumored in the gossip underground that Frank Price, Chairman of MCA/Universal's Motion Picture Group, and one of the most powerful men in the industry, had screened the film in one or another of its final workups, and had declared — vehemently enough and publicly enough for the words to have quickly seeped under the door of the viewing room and formed a miasma over the entire Universal lot — "This film is a dog. It's gonna drop dead. We're going to take a bath on it. Nobody'll understand it!" (Now those aren't the exact words, because I wasn't there. But the sense is dead accurate. Half a dozen separate verifications from within the MCA organization.)

Now when God has a bellyache, all the cherubim start dropping Alka-Seltzer.

The word went out fast and wide. Or fastly and widely, depending on your Yuppie level. And the panic set in. Of a sudden *Dune* was a film not to be seen by the laity.

Reviewers couldn't be trusted. Keep it away from them.

Screenings were cancelled wholesale. Press releases got circumspect. The usually forthcoming pr people at MCA abruptly developed narcolepsy. Something was very wrong. Any time *Dune* was mentioned, eyes rolled. And the rumors built on an asymptotic curve that had everyone nervous as hell. Then:

A major filmwriter who had been at one of the sneak screenings for exhibitors reported a conversation he had overheard between Dino De Laurentiis and the owner of an important chain of multiplex theaters, after the film had been run.

Dino (he reported) had been effusive. It went like this:

DINO: This is my testament! I can now retire! It is great, it is classic!"

EXHIBITOR: Can you save it?

DINO (Sadly): Maybe.

Then we all heard that at an exhibitors' screening — maybe the one above, maybe another — in New York, when the lights came up, one of the attendees leaped to his feet and screamed at Dino across the theater, "When are you going to stop making shit like this? When are you going to give us a picture we can play that will make some money? Are you trying to kill us?"

And *Dune* was in the toilet. Because the priests of the Black Tower, in their panic and paranoia, did what

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they *always* do: they prejudged the film and found it dire. Dire. Absolutely. And there would be no screening, not of any kind, not for *anyone.*

Somehow, I knew the film would not be the disaster Universal was compelling the rest of the world to believe it would be. I had spoken to Frank Herbert a number of times in late November. He was living in Manhattan Beach, making himself available for pre-release publicity, and he told me, when I asked him, sans bullshit, "How do you like the film, Frank? Between old friends. The real appraisal": "It begins as *Dune* begins, it ends as *Dune* ends and I hear my dialogue throughout. How much more could a writer want? Even though I have quibbles — I would've loved to have had David Lynch realize the banquet scene —do I like it? I do. I like it. Very much."

So I wanted to like it, too.

There had been too many intelligent, dedicated people of good faith and enormous talent who had been ground to powder in that sandworm track to dismiss *Dune* merely on the basis of the industry rumor mill's fervor for movie crib-death. (Of *course* the rumor mill wanted *Dune* to founder. If the other studios could cripple one of their big competitors for the Christmas boxoffice attention, before it ever got out of the starting gate, it would make the chances for *their* holiday blockbusters all the better. Most of the rumors I got came not from Universal, but from other studios. No bad word was left unsaid. No rock was left unturned, and no creepy crawly was prevented from emerging. But why was *Universal* wielding the chainsaw on this unborn artifact?)

Frank called me on the q.t. at the end of November. He told me there was to be a secret screening in projection room #1 at Universal on Friday the 30th, at 2:30 pm. The screening was for the reviewers from *Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter.* He did not suggest I sneak in; he only reported the event.

On that Friday I visited other friends on the lot, and found my way to projection room #1 at 2:15.

Booker McClay, a decent man, one of the publicists for Universal, was standing by the inner door. He stopped me. We had spoken over the phone, but had never met. I told him who I was, we shook hands. He looked troubled. He knew my credentials as writer, scenarist, critic. He knew of my association with *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction.* When I told him I was doing the review for *USA Today,* he grew even more troubled. He said I could not go in.

We talked for a few minutes, with me assuring him I was not there to do a hatchet job. He said it was impossible. I showed him my letter from Jerry Shriver, Assistant Entertainment Editor for *USA Today,* confirming my assignment. He said it was impossible that I could have known of this screening,

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and it was impossible... seeing the film, that is. I cajoled, I chatted, I reasoned. Booker McClay is a good guy, and he said he would call Frank Wright, National Publicity Director for MCA, who was at that moment only a few hundred yards away up in the Black Tower.

Booker went into the screening room, which was empty, as *Variety* and *The Reporter* had not yet arrived. He was extremely upset. It was clear to me that he wanted to let me in to screen *Dune,* but the fear was palpable on the lot. And here was this wild cannon insisting on being given access to the The Unviewable!

I followed Booker inside, and stood at a distance from him as he phoned up to the Tower, to Frank Wright. When Booker got Wright, and spoke to him earnestly and softly about the situation, though I was thirty feet from the receiver I heard Frank Wright shout, "What the hell is *he* doing there? How did he find out about this? Get him out of there! No, absolutely not!"

Booker spoke again, hung up the phone, and turned to me. He tried to be ameliorative. It was obvious he'd been put in a shitty position, and didn't want to alienate me. But this was a situation that had to governed by the laws of the Stalag. I had to leave. He said that Frank Wright had set up this screening only for *Variety* and *The Reporter,* and they had promised to hold the reviews before publishing. He said Frank Wright had said I needed stronger accreditation.

Somehow I managed to get Booker to let *me* call Frank Wright. Seeing his career flashing before his eyes, but too decent a guy simply to come all over authoritarian, Booker let me use the phone in the screening room. I called Wright, and spoke to him, saying *USA Today* was an important medium of pr for the film, and I was inclined to write well of the film as I now thought about it, and I would appreciate it if he'd make an exception in this case. He said if he'd heard from Jack Mathews, the West Coast entertainment editor for *USA Today,* he could have done it. But as he hadn't... he had to refuse. He was testy about it, but as polite as he could be, I guess, under the circumstances.

I said, "What if Jack Mathews calls you in the next five minutes and verifies my assignment, and asks you to let me see the film?"

He thought a moment, then said he figured that would be okay. I hung up, called Mathews at the LA office of the newspaper, told him what was happening, and he said he'd call Wright on the other line, that I should hold on. Then, as I waited, I heard him call Wright, heard him speak to Wright, and received Mathews's assurance that everything had been fixed.

"Wait there for Wright's call back," he said. I thanked him, hung up, and relayed the chain of command to

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Booker, who seemed vastly relieved.

Ten minutes later (*Variety* and *The Reporter* had arrived) the phone rang, Booker picked it up, listened, said okay, and hung up. He turned to me, shook his head, and said, "Frank says you can't see the picture."

I left.

But if that was what happened to a reviewer from something as important to Universal as *USA Today,* do you begin to understand how, before the film ever opened, the critical film community was made to feel nervous, negative and nasty about *Dune?*

On Wednesday, December 12th, 1984 — just two days before the rest of the world gained access to *Dune* after fifteen tortuous years — I and a carefully-filtered audience of tv pundits, film critics, magazine reviewers and hangers-on were seated in the Alfred Hitchcock Theater on the Universal City Studios lot, and I listened to all the idle chat around me. It's bad. It's dead. It's confusing. It's gonna die. *Dune's* in, *Dune's* out.

At 8:30 pm they rolled the film.

When it ended, I took my notes, raced back to my office and wrote the review. The next morning, the 13th, I dictated the entire review via long-distance telephony to one of *USA Today* copyeditors. The review ran in conjunction with a critique by Jack Mathews on Friday the 14th, the day *Dune* opened.

Here, reprinted with permission of *USA Today,* is — at long last —what I originally wrote, with everything that was cut for space reinstated. This is what I thought of *Dune,* and this is what I said for "the nation's newspaper" and an audience of 1.3 million readers who would see my words before they rushed toward or away from the nearest theater showing *Dune.*

Only the demon specter of George Lucas looms between *Dune* and millions in boxoffice profits.

After seven years of having its senses jackhammered by witless space adventures like *Star Wars* and its endless clones, the American filmgoing audience may have lost the ability to appreciate a movie demanding an attention-span greater than that required for a Burt Reynolds car crash. But for those whose brains have not been turned to guava jelly by special effects and cartoon plots, *Dune* is an epic adventure as far ahead in this cinematic genre as *2001: A Space Odyssey* was in 1968.

It is the *Gone With the Wind* and *Birth of a Nation* of science fiction films. Filled with ideas and art-directed with a wonderful baroque look, *Dune* is a complex symphony of mystic grandeur. In its way as compelling surreal as something Buñuel or Fellini might conjure up, this faithful translation of the enormously popular Frank Herbert novel offers the wonder of secrets within secrets; a congeries of Chinese puzzle boxes

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opening into visual and intellectual realms the world of cinema has never before revealed.

Simply put, *Dune* is filled with magic! And like an encounter with a wizard, the film stuns normal perceptions, demanding a sense of wonder and close attention.

Scene after scene presents fresh images, cosmic concepts, plot twists and innovations for which standard filmviewing attitudes are wholly inadequate. And therein may lie the essence of the nightmare for director David Lynch, producer Raffaella De Laurentiis, and Universal Studios.

The very strengths of *Dune* contain the seeds of its possible failure in 1984. And it is a casebook study of why most science fiction films of recent memory have been so sophomoric. If one goes to see a western, no explanation is needed to set up the background. See a man in a Stetson with a bandana over his face, lying in wait with a Winchester, and you know the Wells Fargo stagecoach will be coming down that road in a moment. See a patient being wheeled into a hospital on a gurney, and you know that in mere seconds a noble physician will be performing a tracheotomy. Boy and girl meet cute, and you know love and laughs are on their way.

But science fiction postulates worlds that might be, but have never been. So *everything* has to be explained. And with a devious, imaginative story involving four planets, warring Imperial households, alien technology and deeply mystical concepts about our need for messiahs. . . even the smallest details must be explicated. Can an audience corrupted by the soundtrack of an explosion in the airless vacuum of deep space retool its viewing habits to appreciate a film of such complexity?

There are trade-offs that may make it more difficult. In exchange for scope grandeur, the enormity of vast forces in conflict, the color and fascination of alien places we have never seen, *Dune* sacrifices that which science fiction has too often jettisoned: characters whose hearts we know, humor and wit, insights into the human condition. For all its heroes who are competent and heroic beyond measure, for all its villains so malefic that they make Darth Vader no more ominous than a mugger, *Dune* has no *Rocky* or *Chariots of Fire* sprinters to root for. Because we did not need to have the Civil War explained to us, *Gone With the Wind* could concentrate on the travails of Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler.

Yet *Dune* proffers unusual, some might say greater, treasures. For a generation of kids who've grown up with word processers and space shuttles and Isaac Asimov on the best-seller lists, an sf film with a brain. For moviegoers treated to the moral and ethical bankruptcy of slasher films and *Porky's,* a film that deals with concepts of home and courage, loyalty

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and love of family, nationalism and the wonders of the universe.

If the adults who have reviewed this film with confusion are wrong, and more than fifty years of the popularity of serious science fiction has created an audience capable of the joys of the intellectual mind-leap, then *Dune* will reach and uplift its intended viewers. But if the audience has been too far debased with simplistic twaddle, then like *2001,* this film will have to wait for the judgment of time.

The first week, *Dune* made 6 million.

Beverly Hills Cop, which premiered December 3rd, in its three day opening, pulled in $15,214,805. The five-day total: ever so close to 20 million.

In five weeks, by which time it had nearly vanished from the movie screens of America, *Dune* amassed a total of 27.4 million. In five weeks *Beverly Hills Cop* did more than 122 million in boxoffice revenues.

As I write this, *Dune* still cost 40-41 million to produce, with (an estimate) of between 7-10 million for prints and advertising. In its first 110 days of release *Beverly Hills Cop* has made one hundred and ninety-one million, eight hundred and sixty-five thousand, six hundred and fifteen dollars. And change.

It is safe to say *Dune* was a disaster.

Because not one of you was satisfied.

And I submit that you were dissatisfied before you ever got to your theater seat, because the priests of the Black Tower, from Frank Price and Frank Wright on down, quaffed deeply from the cup of derangement that is the brew of choice at Universal. They threw the film community into panic, the stock market into flux, the waiting million who had hungered for *Dune* for a decade-and-a-half into confusion. And they destroyed what I view as a film of considerable worth. Hell, you read my review; I'm on record.

Apparently, only two of the many critics writing for national publications derived sufficient joy from *Dune* to overcome the bad vibes to give the film a positive review. One was David Ansen in *Newsweek.* The other one has just said he's on the record. And nothing could more ironically keynote the symbiotic relationship I described earlier than that Universal, in the person of Frank Wright, after doing everything in its power to scare me off and tilt me toward negativity, exploited my review in major newspaper advertising. With rueful shake of my head I perceive this to be a demonstration of the kind of chutzpah one associates with embezzlers running for public office.

And Frank Herbert suggests that the phrase "*Dune* was a disaster" be amended by one word. *Dune* was a *created* disaster. Of the five hours of *Dune* committed to film, only two

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hours and seventeen minutes made it to the screen. Exhibitors like a flick that runs two hours seventeen, rather than five: they can show it more often in a day. They can empty the theater more often, they can pour in a fresh audience more often, they can sell more Coke and popcorn and toothrot. Maybe De Laurentiis dad & daughter can cut together a tv miniseries with the outtakes. Maybe they can do a theatrical "special edition" a la *Close Encounters*. But it won't be done for the videocassettes (say, in two versions, such as was effected by Warner Home Video when they recently released both the emasculated theatrical version and the full director's cut version of Sergio Leone's wonderful *Once Upon a Time in America*). It won't happen — at least not in the foreseeable future — because they've already announced an early release for *Dune* sometime this summer: two hours seventeen. So Frank Herbert's suggested revision tastes in no way of sour grapes. It *was* a created disaster. Slash out nearly three-fifths of a film for the convenience of cineplex operators trying to push Mounds Bars, and what you offer to the public is a quadriplegic commanded to dance the gavotte.

Overseas, where Frank Price's writ don't run, *Dune* is breaking boxoffice records in West Germany, Italy, Austria, South Africa and France. In England, in its third week, *Dune*'s take was up by 39%, the sort of increase in attendence generally credited to word-of-mouth promotion. Opening night in Paris saw queues of more of 40,000 filmgoers.

Dune will no doubt earn out in foreign revenues, cable and cassette sales, and may already have turned a profit just from merchandising. One never knows. But in the logbook of film history, *Dune* is a major disaster. *Heaven's Gate, Cleopatra, Thoroughly Modern Millie, Ryan's Daughter, Dr. Doolittle, Sorcerer*...and *Dune*.

And here is a grace note for you. Something I got from Frank Herbert for use in the review, for which there was no room, so it was put aside. I reveal it here (Frank assures me) for the first time: the precise moment in which Frank Herbert conceived the grand scheme that became *Dune*.

"I had long been fascinated by the messianic impulse in human society; our need to follow a charismatic leader, from Jesus to John Kennedy. Men who ought to have a warning sign on their forehead reminding us that they, like us, are subject to human frailties. I wanted to write a meaningful book on the subject, but though I had the theme, I couldn't find just the right setting. Then, early in the 1950's, I was doing a piece on the U.S. Department of Agriculture's project controlling dunes on Oregon coast, near Florence. I was in Cessna 150 looking down on that rolling expanse of sand, and suddenly I made the connection

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Mythology tells us that the phoenix rises from its ashes to a new life. With "Three-Mile Syndrome" Robert F. Young ("Glass Houses," November 1984) gives us a thought provoking story about a dying group of people who, like the phoenix, also find their rebirth.

Three-Mile Syndrome

BY
ROBERT F. YOUNG

I am different each time we leave Earth. I despise the country of my birth. It is infested with hypocrisy — the hypocrisy of people who pretend to love their neighbors when in their hearts they know only greed and envy and frustration. Who hide their hatred behind lamblike masks. But I do not wonder why they — and millions of others who are equally abominable — were chosen to live, while those of us here in the stasis ship were condemned to die, because we are no less abominable than they. I hate in unison with the other patients, I am in harmony with them. But it is an apathetic hatred, for we have ceased to care. I hate the girl who administers to our needs, because she does not have eyes for me, and I hate the pilot for whom she has eyes, but my hatred is dulled by dispassion.

I said "leave Earth," lending the impression that the stasis ship itself departs. This isn't true. Earth leaves, and the ship remains in space almost exactly where it was, while Earth makes her annual journey around the sun, and each time she makes her revolution, we wait for her return — not because we really care whether she does or does not, but because we have nothing else to do; mere hours pass for us, one year for her. Time stasis is at work, not time travel, but here on board the ship, we pretend we are traveling in time because traveling is better than standing still, even when you have nowhere to go.

The girl (her name is June) who has eyes only for the pilot begins making the rounds of our ward with her medicine tray. She is a nurse and stewardess combined; neither she nor the pilot is condemned to die. When she comes to where I am brooding by

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my black window, she hands me a tiny paper cup that contains one of the magical capsules the researchers came up with during Earth's most recent revolution. She is brown-haired and blue-eyed, and although she is far from being beautiful, her health makes her seem so. Each time I see her, she seems more beautiful than the time before. Apparently the purity of the air on board the ship has a salubrious effect upon her.

I swallow the casule although I know it has no more therapeutic value than the water I wash it down with. She says that I barely touched my dinner and asks if I am hungry. I tell her no. She says she will bring me a cup of decaffeinated coffee so that I will have something at least in my stomach. I shrug. I doubt if I will even be able to gag it down.

The girl June says that when we rendezvous again, she is certain the researchers will have found a true cure during the year that will have passed for them. But I know better. The next rendezvous will merely be a repetition of all the previous ones, and all the year will have netted will be a new batch of worthless medication. I told the medmen last time they boarded the ship that they were wasting their time, and they said that I was wrong and that next time the researchers will have found what they are searching for. I said, You people said that ten years ago, and you're no closer to curing us now than you were then. They said that a breakthrough was imminent, and that anyway only ten days had passed for me. I said, Hallelujah! They said that I didn't seem to care one way or the other. I said, I don't, and they said that indifference was part of the syndrome and that they would cure me whether I wanted to be cured or not. I said, You look like you need to be cured yourselves. You look sick.

My black window isn't all black; there are polliwogs of light in it. The polliwogs are the stars; the ship's near lack of temporal motion has stretched them out of shape. I watch them often as I recline on my chair-couch, and sometimes they seem to wriggle in my gaze. Polliwogs in a black pond, wriggling. Wriggling and getting nowhere. They bring to mind the human race, which, frantically and for millennia, has been trying to wriggle from point A to point B, without realizing that point B is point A in disguise. I never liked the human race; now I hate it. I am not alone, for I know the other patients in the space ward must hate it, too. It is ironic to know that while we lie here hating together, some of our noble compatriots on orbiting Earth have temporarily cast their own hatred aside and are working round the clock to find a cure for our loathesome disease, while only hours pass for us and a whole year for them.

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The cure, the super antigen, the magic serum. We are, in effect, quarantined in time, although our disease is not contagious. MEASLES, MUMPS, CHICKEN POX, SCARLET FEVER — KEEP OUT! This dedication on the part of our compatriots to the task of saving our lives would be heartwarming if, through the ages, so many lives had not been wasted through neglect and through indifference. But whose neglect? I ask myself. What indifference? The neglect and indifference of other people? But why shouldn't other people be neglectful and indifferent with regard to people who themselves are neglectful and indifferent? Why should one individual expect from another that which he will not bestow himself? It is human to be neglectful, to be indifferent. Neglect and indifference are part of the syndrome of human existence. I have neither the right nor the obligation to expect or to give help. If a man cannot stand on that truth, he deserves to die. I have gone full cycle and am arguing against myself, and I have failed to cast so much as a shadow of doubt on the unselfishness of the people who are trying to save our lives.

"Drink it while it's still warm."

It is the girl June with my coffee. I take the cup from her and set it on the little table beside my chair-couch. "How do you feel?" she asks.

"I feel fine."

"Any new abscesses?"

"No."

"Are you sure?" Her concern seems genuine, but I know it is not. She is pretending to be Florence Nightingale. "You don't need to keep them secret from me."

"You tend to your troubles and I'll tend to mine."

She looks at me, her head cocked slightly to one side. Then she turns away and walks forward to the control room, where her real interest lies.

Directly across the aisle from me on one of the dual chair-couches supplied for the marrieds lie the Warricks. Once, no doubt, they were a handsome couple, but the abscesses that have appeared on their faces have lent them the aspect of a pair of lepers. Thus far, mine have appeared only on my stomach and chest, although there is a new one, I believe, beginning to manifest itself on the inner side of my left thigh. I do not bother to make a visual check, I do not even bother to reach beneath the covers and explore the area with my fingers. Another abscess is simply another hole in a ship that is already sinking into the sea.

At first the etiologists thought the abscesses were a new form of basal cell cancer, and bone marrow tests were not made. When an etiologist named Eustace Siddon insisted that the tests be made, abnormal cells were found in the patients' spicules. They were unlike any cells ever encountered before, and subsequently

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were discovered in the patients' bloodstreams. The disease became known as Siddon's disease, and new cases were diagnosed all over the world. Its cause remained a mystery, but a concerted effort on the part of pharmaceutical companies in the United States, Great Britain, France, and the Soviet Union led to the development of a serum that, when administered soon enough, killed the cells and aborted the marrow's ability to create more. A worldwide inoculation program was launched, but the serum wasn't wholly successful because those who had been first afflicted with the disease were too far gone to be helped. Both the U.S. and the Soviet Union had discovered how to isolate pockets of time, and stasis ships were built in which to house the premature victims till a more effective serum could be developed. Such ships were leased to other nations so that the lives of their premature victims might be sustained by stasis also. I do not know how many stasis ships there are in space now. Ours may be the last one. Our ward is already half-empty.

Sometimes as I look through my black window at the polliwogs of stars, I make mental jumps to Earth Past. I was a successful businessman before the disease struck me. My company bought apartment complexes that the federal government, in its desperate attempt to lower the federal budget, had ceased subsidizing. We refurbished them and gave the renters the option of buying the apartments they were living in. In most cases they could not, since the prices we asked were commensurate with the cost of the renovation — with, of course, a margin of profit added —and in such cases the apartments were bought by outsiders. A bald statement such as this implies inhumanity, but the implication is unjust because in most instances the renters would not have been able to pay the unsubsidized rent and would have had to leave whether I had come along or not. I merely took advantage of a situation for which I could not in any way be held responsible. If inhumanity was involved, it lies on the federal government's doorstep, not mine.

However, I would be the last to say that noble principles have ever guided my conduct. The word that describes me and others like me best is "opportunistic." Opportunism is the essence of a free enterprise system. If you do not have it, you will wind up working for someone who does, and walk the alleys and not the avenues of modern civilization. I have enough liquid assets to buy the stasis ship I am dying on, to buy all the others. But I cannot buy what I need the most: a cure for the disease that is killing me.

The girl June brings us fruit juice, then says good night. I lie on my chair-

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couch and watch the polliwogs. I know that the girl June has gone to bed with the pilot. They are being paid day and night for their stay in space. They have already accrued payment for ten years, and yet they have spent but ten days away from Earth. All the pilot has to do is deactivate stasis when Earth comes into view and then activate it again after the medmen leave the ship, and all the girl June has to do is bring medicine and food (an androchef prepares the meals) to the sick and check to see whether or not they are dead yet.

She and the pilot do not even have to jettison the corpses. They simply let the dead bodies lie on the chair-couches till the medship comes. They are getting rich virtually overnight almost without having to lift a finger. I resent this deeply. I am paying them out of my own pocket, for the Space Force, of which they are a part, is the taxpayers' burden. People like them are barnacles. They cannot make it on their own.

There is a mortician assigned to the medship. Upon rendezvous, his helpers transfer the dead. He is getting rich, too.

It is a long night. I do not sleep well. In the morning the girl June brings me toast and scrambled eggs and decaffeinated coffee. She glances at her wristwatch. "Earth will arrive before long. I *know* that this time they'll have found a real cure."

"How many of us are there left?"

"You're ambulatory. Why don't you count and see next time you go to the bathroom?"

"You know how many. Why don't you tell me?"

"I haven't made a recent count. Eat your breakfast now, like a good boy."

I gag on the scrambled eggs. I cannot swallow the toast. I sip the decaffeinated coffee and watch the polliwogs.

I have figured out why I resent the girl June so much. She wears her hair the same way my wife used to wear hers, and her eyes are the same shade of blue. She even walks the way my wife did.

I hated my wife. But I didn't kill her.

She jumped from her bedroom window of her own free will.

Why did she jump?

I don't know why.

Her suicide occurred the day before the series of nuclear plant disasters that had taken place in this country and in Russia, France, Israel, and the People's Republic of China were reported on TV, so the date is well fixed in my memory. I had already implemented divorce proceedings on the grounds of constructive abandonment. She had not spoken to me for almost a year, and I had finally given up speaking to her. But we were still living together. We would sit like

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dummies at the meals we still shared. She slept in one bedroom and I slept in another. Fortunately, we had no children. I don't think she ever wanted them after she miscarried. I know that after the silent treatment began, I no longer did.

She didn't know what constructive abandonment was. She didn't know that shutting yourself off from someone and not speaking to him constituted grounds for divorce. When she found out, she must have undergone a rude awakening.

But I don't believe it was this that caused her to jump from her window.

I think that when she married me she wanted a father rather than a husband. But I think there was another, much deeper cause of our estrangement. She was the daughter of working people. Her father worked with his hands, so had her grandfather and so did her brothers and sisters. She, too, was working with her hands when I met her, and so was her mother. In a silk mill. So she thought, and her mother and her father and her brothers and her sisters thought, that it was fitting and proper for people to work with their hands, and that people who worked with their minds could not wholly be trusted. The peasant mentality. I think she mistrusted every dollar I ever made after I got my business going. In her mind, and in her mother's and her father's and her brothers' and her sisters' minds, a husband should go daily to a factory, punch a clock, work for four hours, punch the clock for lunch, punch it again afterward, work for four hours more, punch the clock once more, and then go home. And if you could work overtime, so much the better. I told her that only fools worked in factories, and I think that this was the rift that eventually resulted in our estrangement.

When I go to the bathroom, I look at the dead. But I do not count them. They are easy to distinguish because the girl June has tied tags to their toes. Soon I shall be too weak to walk that far. Then, each time I have to go, I shall have to summon the androrderly. It will bring me a bedpan or a urinal, and I shall no longer be able to leave my black window.

My wife used to tell me when we were still speaking that I made my money robbing the poor. I told her that this was how all businessmen made their money, that it was the way free enterprise worked. The poor, I told her, were born to be robbed. But it's wrong to rob the old poor, she said, referring to those on Supplemental Social Security, many of whom lived in the apartment complexes that I bought and refurbished. The old poor are worthless burdens on the taxpayers' backs, I said. Somebody should rob them. You're talking about my grandmother and my grandfather, she said. Yes, I said, and your great-

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aunts and your great-uncles, too.

"Look," the girl June says, pausing by my chair-couch and pointing to my black window. "Earth's coming back."

Seen from stasis, Earth has the aspect of a pale polliwog, much larger than the others. I can see the moon, too. It is a silver polliwog and, like Earth, seems to be hurtling toward us. Abruptly their pace slows as the pilot deactivates stasis, and Earth reacquires her blue, familiar face, and I can see the man in the moon.

We will await the coming of the medmen. And the mortician.

The girl June serves dinner. I did not touch my lunch, but I haven't even a ghost of an appetite. "They should be here by now," I tell her.

"They will be any minute."

"Is their ship in the viewscreen?"

"No, but it will be any second. Eat your dinner."

She has resurrected my wife again. As we grew richer and the imaginary partition bisecting the house acquired greater and greater thickness, she grew deeper and deeper into herself. I began spending more frequent weekends with my secretary. At the trial the D.A. tried to pass my secretary off as a sort of *femme fatale,* arguing that, unable to wait for the divorce to go through, I had killed my wife so I could marry her. On the witness stand I stated that I had had no intention of marrying my secretary; and she, when she took the stand, stated that I had been keeping company with her solely because I was estranged from my wife, and that marriage had been even further from her mind than it had been from mine. I was found Not Guilty.

After the trial, the abscesses began to appear.

The girl June makes the rounds with her medicine tray. The medship still hasn't arrived. She is cheerful, as always. "Now don't you people worry," she says as she dispenses the capsules. "It'll be here any second. And I know that this time they've found a cure."

Later on, when she makes the rounds with fruit juice, I ask if there have been any radio messages from Earth explaining the delay. She shakes her head. "There's a slight communications problem."

"You mean the radio doesn't work?"

"We're not certain whether it's the radio or not, but when we transmit, we get no answer. But I'm sure that the medship will be here any minute."

I can hear the questions the other patients put to her as she continues down the aisle. "They've given up on us," a woman says. It is evident from the flat tone of her voice that hope left her long ago.

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I lie back in my chair-couch wondering if they really have given up, and I conclude that there must be another reason why the medship hasn't arrived, because even if they have given up, the medmen would still come round with more capsules and more lies.

I watch the stars between brief bouts of sleep. It is hard to believe that once they were polliwogs in a big black pool. I like them less than I did the polliwogs. The polliwogs at least were companionable. The stars leave me cold.

I do not care whether the medship comes or not.

It is clear by now that it isn't going to come. It is morning, and breakfast has been served, and the girl June is making the rounds with her medicine tray. When she finishes she goes into the control room, and a moment later the pilot steps into the ward. He is a tall, spare man who hasn't yet seen thirty. The health that radiates from him disgusts me.

He raises his hands for the attention he already has. "The medship, as you know, has yet to appear," he says, "and we are unable to contact Earth. I'm certain that there's nothing seriously wrong, but we can't find out what the score is unless we go down and see. There'll be no discomfort during atmosphere reentry, and after we land there'll be no need for any of you to leave the ship. Now don't you people worry — everything'll turn out just fine!"

He steps back into the control room. The girl June reappears and tells us to lie back on our chair-couches. The stars shift in my black window, and the ship descends to Earth.

The pilot and the girl June go outside. We have landed in a large field. Through my window, which is no longer black but green and blue, I can see the serrated shoulders of a distant city. Nearby, several cows are grazing. Our landing was silent and did not startle them.

The pilot did not close the locks, and I can smell Earth air. It is refreshingly different from the sterile air in the ship. The sun has just risen. The season is spring.

I sit up on my chair-couch. The other patients who are still living sit up on theirs. We wait for the girl June and the pilot to reenter the ship. The sun climbs higher into the sky. The girl June and the pilot do not reappear.

I lower my feet to the deck and stand up. I find that I can walk with no difficulty at all. I walk through the control room and through the open locks and step outside. I see the girl June and the pilot almost at once. They are lying on the ground. Their faces are cyanotic. I bend down and feel their carotid arteries. They are dead.

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There is a highway not far away. There are no cars on it. There is no sign of human life anywhere. A flock of birds wings by overhead.

The other patients have filed out of the ship. I see the Warricks. The abscesses have begun to fade away.

I undo my hospital gown and look at my chest and stomach. My own abscesses have also begun to fade away.

The air seems to shimmer with a light of its own. Each lungful I breathe in invigorates me.

Suddenly I know that the city is dead. That most of the people on Earth are dead. And I know why.

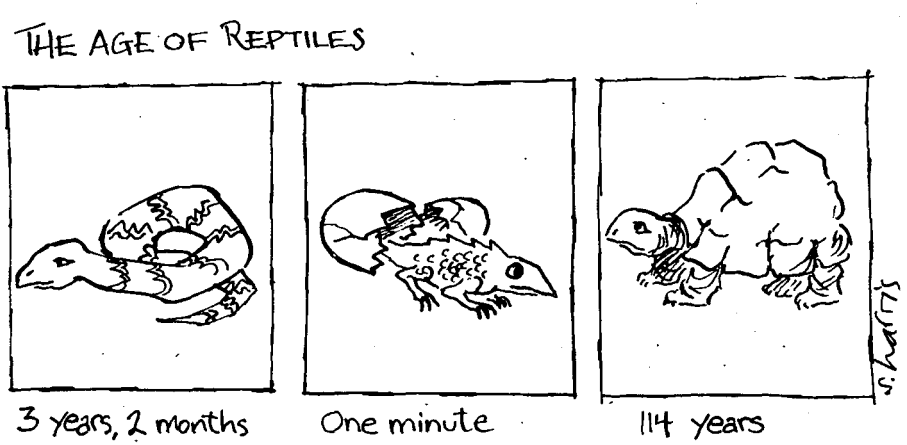
"Siddon's disease" was the self-aborted attempt of the human race to adapt to the nuclear age. Had it not been for the serum, they would have succeeded, as the animals did.

No bombs were ever dropped. None needed to be.

Those of us who really were ill were made so first because we adapted too soon, and second, because we were poisoned by the uncontaminated air of the stasis ships.

We have inherited the Earth.

The other patients have also guessed the truth. They are in a state of shock and do not know what to do. I put some of them to work burying the bodies of the girl June and the pilot, and the bodies on board the ship. There is a farmhouse beyond the field. It will do for the time being. I tell the rest of the patients to start transferring the usable contents of the ship to my new demesne. I know at least who I really am. I have fallen from heaven twice. I did a good job on the world the first time. This time I will do an even better one.



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Nancy Etchemendy first appeared in F & SF *with her fantasy, "Clotaire's Balloon" (November 1984). She returns with an equally striking but very different story. The ladies of Wahloon Lake are a friendly group who only want to welcome newcomers and help them ... fit in.*

The Ladies of Wahloon Lake

BY
NANCY ETCHEMENDY

Joanie's friends at Apricot Advertising threw a big farewell party for her just before she moved to Wahloon Lake. There was an open bar and a lot of food. Her husband, Donald, didn't come, because he had pulled a double shift at the hospital where he was just finishing his residency.

The party was held at a well-known Chinese restaurant on Embarcadero Street, the Silk Pelican. Joanie had the impression that over a hundred people showed up, but she was never sure about the exact number because she was too busy and excited to count them all. Besides, she drank far too much bourbon and smoked far too many cigars. By the time the evening was half over, her eyes were out of focus and she felt pleasant and dreamy. The exact size of the party no longer mattered to her.

Chuck, the vice president of the agency, presented her with a little gold apricot on a fine gold chain. The apricot was engraved. It said:

FAREWELL TO JOANIE
THE GREATEST LITTLE TATTOO ARTIST
WEST OF THE MISSISSIPPI
WITH LOVE FROM ALL OF US AT
APRICOT ADVERTISING

The message referred to Joanie's avocation, the design and application of original tattoos. It was set in her favorite type style, a classic book face called Palatino Roman. Such thoughtfulness on the part of her friends touched her deeply. She would have cried as Chuck fastened the necklace, only the chain got tangled up in the big dinner napkin that someone had tied around her neck to protect her expensive designer blouse from the soy sauce that kept splattering up from her chop suey.

So instead of crying, she

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laughed, raised her glass, and said something like, "Thanks! Here's to everybody." People laughed in return, and slapped her on the back and kissed her tearfully.

At about midnight the room began to twirl slowly before her eyes, and it occurred to her that if she didn't leave soon, she might not get home until well into the next day. So she said her last good-byes with a peculiar tightness in her throat, untied the dinner napkin, and got into her sports car. She let down the roof so the stars could shine in, put Rocky and the Pansers on the digital sound system, lit a cigar, and drove home trying hard to obey the speed limit.

When she arrived at the twelfth-floor apartment where she and Donald lived, Joanie took off her expensive blouse and her itchy, virgin wool skirt. She took off everything but her necklace. Wrapped in a blanket, she waddled onto the balcony and lowered herself carefully into the wicker swing chair. Sipping a brandy, she tried to think positively about her future as a doctor's wife in the wealthy little town of Wahloon Lake, where Donald planned to set up his first practice with an old friend from medical school.

She tilted her glass slightly toward the city lights below. "Here's to Wahloon Lake. Time for everything. House. Babies. Gourmet cooking. Damn." Her voice sounded funny.

Donald woke her up with a kiss when he got home.

"Come on, Jayvee baby," he whispered. "It's freezing out here."

She stood up, drenched and shivering from the fog. Donald put his arm around her and led her inside. He warmed her with his body, and in the moment just before she slipped back into dreams, the world seemed sweet and clear.

Joanie had never seen Wahloon Lake before, but it closely fit her preconceptions; cosmetically, at least. Downtown there were a lot of shops that sold well-made tweed and woolen clothing, calfskin luggage, and Swiss watches. There were two hardware stores, a butcher who hung the carcasses of skinned rabbits in his window each morning and kept a cage of live pheasants next to the freezer door, and an establishment where one could purchase the finest Continental and New York State wines. There was a library and a cemetery and a church with stained-glass windows. There was a cinema and a dime store. There were four banks. Every day at noon, women in broad-brimmed hats and floral print dresses ate leisurely lunches in the two cafés, paying in cash and tipping generously. Every morning the shopkeepers hosed and scrubbed the sidewalks in front of their stores, and every evening at five they locked up and went home.

Joanie had done so well as an

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Apricot account executive that she and Donald had enough money for a house on Cherry Street. It was a good house, pleasantly old-fashioned and filled with details. The ceilings and banisters were mahogany, smooth and bright from years of meticulous polishing. The front door was solid and heavy, and had panels of leaded, etched glass set into it. A wide, shady veranda ran along the front of the house, overlooking a weedless green lawn and beds of bright perennial flowers. Every now and then, little girls in plaid skirts and little boys in crisp chinos ran along the tree-lined street, chirping and scolding like birds; but otherwise the neighborhood was quiet.

The realtor gave Donald and Joanie the keys on the afternoon when the escrow closed. The two of them went directly to the new house, opened the front door, and stood grinning at each other in the yellow light that filtered into the entryway. Joanie liked the house. It had good karma.

"Too bad the Jack Daniels is still packed," she said. "We could have a little christening party."

"Why don't we have one anyway?" Donald showed his teeth in a way that made her giggle.

Joanie realized that Donald was looking wonderfully fit and happy. He had been getting enough sleep for the first time since he started medical school, and his frost-gray eyes were shining. All of this made Joanie feel rather randy.

"Party?" she said, closing the front door.

"Party," said Donald. He took off his jacket and spread it on the exquisite hardwood floor.

Joanie unbuttoned Donald's shirt and flung it into a distant corner. Donald had broad shoulders and practically no hair on his chest. This, coupled with a secret streak of rakishness, made him a tattoo artist's dream. Joanie had done the first tattoo on their wedding night, a small but fearsome grizzly bear whose eye was actually Donald's left nipple. During five years of marriage, his pectorals had become an intricate montage of creatures, mythical figures, and sailing ships in exotic settings. She was particularly proud of the pigments, many of which she had developed and mixed herself. Tingling all over, she kissed his illustration of the Flying Cloud.

Half an hour later, clothed only in Donald's jacket, she relaxed beside him on the floor. She lit a cigar and watched the changing patterns of smoke in sunlight.

"Nice party," she said, breathing deeply.

"I thought so, too," said Donald. Sniggering, he pinched her. His grizzly bear twitched.

At that moment, a woman's face appeared at the door window.

The face looked nice enough, wrin-

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kled but carefully made up. It was the smile that unnerved her — matching rows of small, sharp teeth. Joanie gasped and pulled the jacket lapels together. Cinders shaken loose from the cigar landed on her bare thigh. Whooping, she leaped to her feet, released the lapels, and flailed at herself. When she looked up again, the face was gone.

"Jeez, what nerve?" Joanie rubbed at the red burn on her thigh, just above the nose of a small, iridescent white rocket ship, the only tattoo she had ever allowed herself.

"Who was that?"

Joanie squinted at the door window, trying to imagine which kind of curtain would look best with it. "How am I supposed to know? Probably just some horny neighbor."

"Well, in that case," said Donald, wriggling one eyebrow, "let's give her something to look at."

Joanie smiled.

Joanie did not see the face again until a month later, on a gray, muggy afternoon. She had spent the morning pacing up and down the creaky living room floor and smoking a lot. She thought of her job at Apricot Advertising, where the phone never quit, everyone was continually high on caffeine, and even the bathroom chitchat was intense. She wished that Donald did not have to spend so much time at his new office, because the charms of exploring the countryside in her sports car had begun to wear thin, and the house was so spotless and pretty that she felt like kicking things whenever she was inside it. Meandering toward the kitchen, she discovered that the thought of another gourmet meal made her want to throw up. Just to see what would happen, she opened the door of the color-coordinated refrigerator. A grapefruit fell out on the no-wax linoleum.

In Joanie's experience, grapefruits were good for just one thing: practicing new tattooing methods. Brightening, she tucked the grapefruit under her arm. She carried it to the veranda along with three of her tattoo machines and a set of vegetable dyes. She lit up a cigar. Three bottles of experimental iridescent dye had recently arrived from her supplier in San Francisco. There were a lovely emerald, a peacock blue, and a shining scarlet — perfect shades for a dragon.

Joanie arranged her materials on the redwood picnic table and set to work with her favorite No. 3 needle. Soon the outlines of a fabulous serpent appeared on the skin of the grapefruit. She increased the size of the needle and began to apply the new iridescent green. The color was so magnificent that before long, Apricot Advertising and Wahloon Lake and even Donald were far, far away.

The sound of heels on the wood-

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en porch steps might as well have been the crack of rifle shots. The grapefruit leaped from Joanie's hands and rolled across the veranda. The woman on the stairs stooped to pick it up gingerly, as if it might be infected with a faintly disgusting bacterium.

"Sorry to startle you, dear," she said. "Have I interrupted something important?"

Joanie recognized the face she had seen peering through the door window. She laid down her tattoo machine and picked up her cigar, hoping that she could apply the advice Donald had given her. "Whatever you do," he had said, "be nice. We may want to stay here awhile."

Joanie put on the smile that had charmed the directors of Seaboard Plow Bolt into buying $160,000 worth of television time. "Hello. Of course you haven't interrupted anything. I was just . . . just practicing special techniques."

The woman returned her smile, revealing those memorable teeth. The smile made Joanie think of small, carnivorous fish, grinning in the murky water of a jungle river. Joanie chided herself. The woman couldn't help the size of her teeth, after all, and everything else seemed completely as it should be. Soft, platinum white hair, bright eyes, a conservative navy blue dress with a tasteful amount of white piping. The woman was the essence of Wahloon Lake.

"Genevieve Witherspoon," said the woman, handing the grapefruit back.

"Joan Vignolo." Joanie laid the grapefruit on the table and put down her cigar preparatory to shaking hands.

Genvieve cocked her head. "Vignolo?" she said. "That's Italian, isn't it?" She did not offer her hand. "I'm pleased to meet you, dear."

"I'm pleased to meet you, too. Won't you sit down?"

"Believe me, I'd love to, dear. And I do want to find out all about your little hobby sometime." Genevieve gestured toward the tattoo machines. "But I'm on my way to an organizational meeting for the summer fete."

Joanie began to feel as if she had taken the wrong path through an unfamiliar forest. Was she lost? Summer fete? What on earth was a summer fete?

"Oh, what fun," said Joanie.

"Well, not really," said Genevieve. "I just stopped by to tell you that the Women's Guild is having brunch on Saturday, and we'd like you to come. Will you?"

"I'd love to," said Joanie, wondering whether or not this was the truth.

"Fine. Eleven o'clock at one sixty-eight Cherry Street, dear. See you there."

Genevieve waved cheerily, turned, and walked off down the street.

Joanie went to the kitchen and drank a double bourbon without knowing exactly why.

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As Saturday approached, Joanie resisted several strange urges. She very nearly bought a conservative, floral print dress with matching hat and gloves from an expensive shop downtown. She did not need the dress; in fact, she did not even like it. As for hat and gloves, she had never worn them in her life.

After that, she went to the dim, fragrant tobacco shop on Mercer Street to replenish her supply of cigars. The proprietor raised an eyebrow and said, "Are these for madam?"

Joanie put her hands on her hips and stared at him. "I don't think it should matter," she said.

The eyebrow went down. "Might I suggest these?" He held up a package of little tan cigarettes with tasteful double stripes printed in gold near the filters. For a brief and terrible instant, she found herself thinking that perhaps he was right. Perhaps cigars were unbecoming. At the last minute, she made a good save.

"Sorry, chump. They're not my style," she said, and took her business to the smoke and lottery outlet on the side of town where the servants lived. The smoke and lottery outlet was lit with fluorescents and smelled like newspaper ink, but at least the proprietor was more interested in the horse races than in what his customers bought from him.

In the shower the next morning, Joanie caught herself trying to scrub her rocket ship off.

"What the hell am I doing?" Her voice bounced around the tile and porcelain.

"Huh?" said Donald, shaving at the sink.

"I'm losing my ever-loving mind."

Donald peeked around the shower curtain, beaming, his cheeks half-covered with shaving cream and his eyes still dreamy with sleep. "Losing your ever-loving mind? Anything I can do to help find it?"

Joanie squinted at him lasciviously.

On Saturday the weather was beautiful. Joanie woke up early and stood at the window enjoying the large, blue sky, the smell of dew on roses and daisies, and the faint touch of a breeze on her skin. The world clicked along like a train with a name. Thinking of Genevieve Witherspoon, Joanie laughed.

When she arrived at 168 Cherry Street — which was, as she'd expected, the residence of Genevieve and Thurber Witherspoon — the fashionable ladies of Wahloon Lake were already there. At the last moment, feeling rebellious, Joanie had put on a pair of army surplus utility trousers and a blazer. She was the only one who did not have a floral print dress, a broad-brimmed straw hat, and gloves. She considered the similarities between herself and certain English pioneer women along the brightly adorned savages of Kenya.

By the time the two maids served

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brunch in the courtyard, thirty-eight smiling women had introduced themselves to her. She was very tired of hearing about how wonderful it was to be a doctor's wife. And she could not shake off her general impression that all the members of the Women's Guild had small, sharp teeth.

In an effort to relax, Joanie drank champagne until she could no longer detect her upper lip except by touching it with her fingers. She deliberately ate her seafood cocktail with a soup spoon. She discovered a diminutive pair of decorated scissors beside her plate, and used them handily on her salad. After the dessert, fat green grapes and cheese, she lit a cigar and leaned back in her chair.

Genevieve, seated next to her, smiled politely.

In the branches of a nearby tree, a bird sang. Joanie wished the bird would shut up. She flicked ashes into her saucer and considered how much fun it would be to make Genevieve stop smiling.

"Well, Genevieve, I suppose you must be rich, too. Where did you get all your money?"

"Have you ever heard of WT&A?" Genevieve displayed her teeth.

Joanie inadvertantly swallowed cigar smoke, but managed to keep from choking.

"Witherspoon Transformation and Alteration?"

"The same."

"But I thought Witherspoon went bankrupt after . . ." Joanie let the sentence trail off. Even through her champagne haze, she realized how truly indelicate it would be to say aloud: . . . *went bankrupt after unexpectedly turning forty-two thousand United States Army infantrymen into armadillos.*

Genevieve finished the sentence for her. "Went bankrupt after the armadillo deal. Well, as we say in the trade, things are not always what they appear to be. After all, there was only one antidote, and it belonged to Witherspoon. The government had its reasons for seeing that Thurber and I were well taken care of afterward, dear."

Reasons? thought Joanie. She imagined Genevieve primly dressed in navy blue, smiling like a tropical fish as she threatened the president with the permanent armadillohood of forty-two thousand troops.

Genevieve stood up and tapped her champagne glass with a silver demitasse spoon. "Ladies, ladies, I'd like to propose a toast to our newest member, Joan Vignolo."

"Wait a minute . . . I . . ." said Joanie.

"Now, now, Joan, you really *must* join. All the doctors' wives are members of the guild. Here in Wahloon Lake we take care of our own."

Joanie pushed back her chair. A wayward cicada hummed in the flower bed. Thirty-eight silent faces leered at her. She felt as if she'd un-

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expectedly been thrown into the Amazon River.

"But I'm really not the ladies' club type."

Genevieve fluttered her eyelids and flashed her teeth. "Yes, dear, but we know you'll change. It's really not so difficult. A good copy of Emily Post, a few modifications in your wardrobe. The cigars must go, of course; and — I hardly need mention it —the tattoo."

Joanie stood up, bumping the table and knocking her chair over. Her cheeks felt hot and rosy. "Just a damn minute," she said.

Genevieve touched her lightly on the hand. "Remember, dear, you're a representative of Wahloon Lake now. Our image is important to us, after all."

Joanie sensed that it would be wisest to say nothing, nothing at all. But it was as if she had a steamroller inside her, set in motion by a powerful engine, and impossible to stop.

"Go get laid," she found herself saying. "It might improve your disposition." She flung her napkin into the skeletal remains of her grapes, turned, and stamped through the courtyard gate.

"We'll be here if you change your mind, dear," Genevieve called after her.

At home Joanie found a note from Donald taped to the banister. It said: "Dear Jayvee Baby, Bracky Doris decided to deliver, so I'm at the hospital for the duration. See you. Sorry. I love you I love you I love you."

"Screw," said Joanie, heading for the liquor cabinet.

She pulled open the door and stared at the bourbon bottle. The house was very quiet. Outside, the Japanese wind chimes Donald had given her for their anniversary rang softly. No, she thought. It's not Donald's fault that he's never home, and anyway, it's going to take more than that and more than a twit like Genevieve Witherspoon to get Joanie Vignolo down. She closed the cabinet door.

Joanie grabbed a scarf and sunglasses, then went outside and jumped into the sports car. She put a digiplate of Brazilian jazz on the sound system and turned it up full. She started the engine. A mellow roar issued from the chrome tail pipes; the instrument panel sang with reflected sunlight.

"All right," she whispered. "Let's have some fun, baby."

She loved mountain roads. On mountain roads Joanie and the car merged into a single excellent animal sweeping like a shadow through the land where it was born. The animal thought of nothing except the joy of running.

Joanie hurtled along deserted highways, judging curves she'd never seen before. Tires squealed; valves and pis-

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tons screamed; Brazilian trumpets blared. She drove through the hills toward the unfamiliar metropolis that lay beyond them.

Two hours later Joanie arrived in the city. She parked the car at a public garage, bought a map, and wandered through the streets. She drank espresso at a sidewalk café. She chatted with an artist who drew bright chalk designs on concrete. In a hidden loft, she haggled with a dark-eyed woman over an embroidered silk jacket.

Late in the afternoon Joanie developed a headache. At a corner grocery she bought a pocket tin of aspirin, a can of orange juice, and two crisp, purple plums. She drank the orange juice and took some aspirin, but the headache persisted. Nibbling a plum, she strolled back toward the parking garage. Joanie felt light-headed. She wondered if she might be catching something.

She looked around for a place to sit down, but found none. The street on which she had stopped was not a good one for loitering. Tiny shops with lighted signs crowded next to one another. "Adult Books," "Marital Aids," "Live Sex Acts." Joanie desperately wanted a chair. She had never fainted before, and did not know how it felt, but believed that she would find out if she did not sit down soon.

There were three shops nearby. One said, "Male and Female Bondage on Stage." Another said, "Scorcher Arcade. Massages in Back." The third shop had a small beige and maroon sign that said, "Xanadu Specialized Implement Company." Joanie pulled open the brass-handled door and stumbled into the gloomy interior. There was so little light that at first she could hardly see anything. The smell of incense was overpowering. After a few seconds she made out the dark figure of a woman behind a counter.

"Please — is there a place where I could sit down?" said Joanie. She leaned against the wall. Swarms of black, batlike shapes gathered on the peripheries of her vision.

She caught brief snatches of a strange language. Dimly, she was aware of strong hands guiding her to a chair. She did not faint. The bats began to disappear.

"Here. Drink this. You'll feel better," said a gravelly contralto voice.

Joanie gulped the contents of a small paper cup. Liquid cinnamon and fire ran down her throat. She coughed. Someone slapped her repeatedly on the back.

"You O.K.?"

"Yeah, yeah," said Joanie.

Before her stood a tall, sharp-faced woman. Shining black hair hung down below the bandana that covered her head, and silver rings dangled from her ears. She wore a black leather corselet, calf-length leather skirt, and tall black-leather boots.

Joanie glanced around. In front of her was a wooden display case filled

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with joy jelly, imaginatively shaped latex objects, and bottles labeled "Oil of Love." The walls of the shop were lined with shelves from floor to ceiling. They were cluttered with exotic soaps and creams, dog-eared paperback books, and imported delights. A huge rusty nail had been driven into the wall near one corner. A thick leather bullwhip hung from it in a prominent coil. Joanie eyed the whip, wishing she had stayed on the street.

"Well, uh, thanks, but I guess I'd better be going now," she said.

The woman placed a firm hand on her shoulder. "Sit down a minute. You don't feel so hot. I can tell."

Joanie smiled shakily and glanced at the bullwhip again.

"You like this?" The woman walked over and picked it up, uncoiling it to its full length. "It's a nice one." She held it up for Joanie to see.

"Oh, yes, I agree," said Joanie.

The woman looked into her eyes. "You know, I got a feeling about you. I think I got just what you want."

She stepped behind the counter. "I don't show these to just any customer," she said.

She held up what looked like a pair of gold handcuffs fastened together with a stout leather braid.

Joanie stared at them. Something about the combination of rich gold and tough leather appealed to her. She wanted to touch them. She imagined clicking them onto Donald's wrists. Then she thought of them on Genevieve Witherspoon. The whole thing was ridiculous. She smiled.

"Gee," she said.

"Thirty-five dollars. I got some for the ankles, too, if you're interested."

Seventy dollars poorer, Joanie drove back to Wahloon Lake. Donald was still at the hospital when she got home. Apparently, Bracky Doris was having a harder time than most.

Joanie felt as if she had a fever. Exhausted, she drank a huge glass of orange juice and went to bed.

The sun had barely risen when Joanie awoke with an odd sensation in her spine. Moving carefully so as not to disturb Donald, she got up and went into the bathroom. She stood in front of the mirror. She looked awful. Her skin was mottled and grayish. She ran her hand along her backbone. It felt . . . unfamiliar.

She got out a hand mirror and held it so that she could see her back. Staring at herself, she thought at first that she must be dreaming. The dream did not go away. Running full length on her spine were nine overlapping bony plates, variegated pink, gray, and black. Where the last vertebra should have been, there were three new ones. She was growing a tail.

"Holy Jesus!" Joanie shouted. She clapped her hand over her mouth.

"Whatsa matter?" Donald groaned.

"Nothin', nothin', sweetie. Go back to sleep. I, uh . . . I just cut myself shaving."

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Joanie shut the bathroom door.

She took another look. The tail was still there. Apprehensively, she opened her mouth. Was it her imagination, or were her teeth smaller and sharper than they had been last night? She contemplated her feet. Her toenails had grown half an inch while she slept. There was no sense denying it. She was turning into an armadillo.

In the shower Joanie actually did cut herself shaving. She also swore a lot, and broke an almost-new bar of soap in half.

"I'm not joining any goddamn ladies' club," she muttered as she scrubbed her tattoo. "Genevieve Witherspoon has damn well made her last armadillo."

Joanie's gold apricot clanked against the sink as she put on her eye shadow. Farewell to Joanie, the greatest little tattoo artist west of the Mississippi. Not yet, Genevieve. Not quite yet.

Joanie slid the closet door open inch by inch so that it would not wake Donald. She pulled on her baggiest jeans and sweater; they hid her new armadillo parts quite successfully. She slung her largest purse over her shoulder, then sneaked down the hallway to her studio and picked up her iridescent dyes and an Owens battery-powered tattoo machine. She had a rule about not drinking before noon, but as she passed the liquor cabinet on her way to the back door, she took a quick swig of bourbon, then tucked the bottle under her arm.

Outside on the front seat of the sports car, the bag from Xanadu Specialized Implements lay unopened. She took out the gold and leather shackles and stuffed them into her purse along with the tattoo equipment and the bourbon. Then she stalked down the street toward No. 168. It was not quite seven o'clock. The rambling houses of Cherry Street stood deserted in the sunshine, each with a fresh Sunday paper on the steps. Finches tweeted in the shrubbery. The air smelled of wet, green leaves.

When she got to Genevieve's, Joanie marched straight through the courtyard to the back of the house. She picked up half a dozen quartz pebbles from the flower bed and began to flick them one by one at the windows.

"Genevieve, hey, Genevieve, I've made up my mind," she shouted. "Hey, Genevieve."

She picked up another handful of pebbles. They made satisfying pings on the glass.

"Hey, Genevieve, I've made up my mind. I want to talk to you."

Genevieve's head appeared in one of the windows. Her hair lay in thin, white waves on her shoulders. She smiled.

"Ah, Joan, dear. How lovely to see you. Quite a nice morning, isn't it?"

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She turned and said something unintelligible to someone in the room behind her.

"Just charming, I'm sure. But I think we have other things to talk about," said Joanie.

"The Women's Guild, you mean?"

"Yes. The Women's Guild. You might say I've really seen the light. I'd like to come in and discuss the uh . . . formalities with you."

"Right now, dear? I'm not quite presentable, I'm afraid."

"I'm pretty anxious to get matters . . . you know, matters . . . settled."

For the first time, Genevieve looked slightly sour. "Why don't you go away and come back for tea at ten o'clock?"

Joanie straightened her arms at her sides and clenched her fists to stop the shaking. "Sorry, Genevieve. Either you come down or I come up. Take your choice."

"Oh, bother," said Genevieve fractiously. All traces of the smile disappeared. "Let me at least get a robe on. I'll meet you at the tradesman's entrance."

By the time Genevieve opened the tradesman's door, both her tropical fish smile and her composure had returned.

"Hello, dear. Thurber's putting on a nice kettle for some hot tea. Won't you come in?"

"Thanks." Head high and shoulders square, if trembling, Joanie entered the spacious kitchen of the Witherspoon residence.

"Cook's day off?" she asked.

"Why, yes, as a matter of fact," said Genevieve sweetly. "We do believe in keeping Sunday sacred."

She offered Joanie a seat at the long wooden worktable in the center of the room. A wraithlike fellow with a wild fringe of gray hair set a china teapot before them, wiping his hands on his white velour kimono.

"Oh, how rude of me," said Genevieve. "My husband, Thurber Witherspoon. Thurber, this is Joan Vignolo."

Thurber smiled jerkily. "Nice to meet you," he said, and sat down at the far end of the table.

Joanie took a deep breath. "Look, Genevieve. I'm not going to beat around the bush. I want the antidote and I want it now."

"My dear, let's not be hasty." Genevieve poured tea into china cups.

Joanie pushed her cup away. "I've got my own." Producing the bourbon bottle, she lifted it briefly in Genevieve's direction and said, *"Salut."*

Genevieve pressed her lips together in a thin, unbecoming line and said nothing.

"Let's get something straight. I don't intend to become one of Genevieve Witherspoon's fashionable fish. And I don't intend to spend the rest of my life as an armadillo. Give me the anitidote now, please."

Genevieve turned toward Thurber and nodded her head.

In a flash the old man jumped up

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and grabbed Joanie around the neck from behind. Joanie struggled, tipping over her chair. Thurber jammed his elbow into her nose. Blood flew everywhere. Joanie bit into the leathery flesh of his arm as hard as she could. Thurber squealed and backed away, whimpering.

"Thurber, you fool!" cried Genevieve, leaping to her feet.

Joanie felt wonderful. With a set of shackles in each hand, she sprang up on the table and roared, "Genevieve, you old bat! You're gonna get yours!" The taste of Thurber's blood and her own filled her mouth. This is what it's like to be a lion, she thought joyfully. She tackled Genevieve.

The two of them rolled across the floor, kicking, grunting, and shouting while Thurber hovered in the background. Joanie wrestled Genevieve onto her stomach and shackled her hands behind her back. Sitting on Genevieve's butt, she spun around and shackled her legs as well. Gevevieve howled as Joanie's new tailbones dug into her back. "Thurber, do something! Call the police! How can you stand there?"

Joanie looked up, wiping her nose on her sleeve. "I promise you, Genevieve will be very sorry if you move one muscle, Thurber."

Thurber fidgeted, his hands clasped white-knuckled under his chin, but made no move for the telephone.

Joanie dragged Genevieve over to where the iridescent dyes and the Owens tattoo machine lay scattered on the floor. She rolled her onto her back. Sitting on Genevieve's stomach, she pinned her head to the floor with her forearm. Genevieve's left cheek was beautifully, perfectly exposed. Joanie picked up the Owens and pressed the trigger. The needle vibrated like a mechanical rattlesnake. Blue sparks flew.

"You know what this is?" Joanie shouted.

"Don't hurt me!" cried Genevieve.

"This is an Owens tattoo machine. And I'm a desperate woman, so unless you want a permanent armadillo tattooed on your cheek, you'd better come up with the antidote."

"For God's sake, Thurber, get the antidote!" screamed Genevieve.

Thurber gazed pleadingly at Joanie. "All right!" she shouted, and he scurried off into the hidden nether portions of the house.

Joanie was shaking violently. She felt like a rogue sewing machine. She wondered how things had ever become so complicated. She thought of Donald, asleep in the morning sun with grizzly bears and sailing ships dancing across his chest. Once, in a peaceful moment before they slept, Donald had touched her hair softly and said, "I love you for all your eccentricities."

She had snuggled against him and fallen asleep happy. She knew Donald wasn't the only one. *Most* people liked

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her, for all her eccentricities. But that was at home, where she had understood more about everyone, and about the orders and causes that explained why they did the things they did. In Wahloon Lake she understood nothing. She realized that since her arrival in this peculiar place, she had been flying blind, trusting a feeling that seemed to well up from the deepest center of her, a conviction that the person known as Joanie Vignolo was worth saving. But the struggle was wearing her out.

Dear God, she wished Donald would take her home. Tears threatened. She fought them with anger.

"Damn it, Genevieve. Why did you have to screw around with me like this? Why can't you just accept people as they are?"

"I . . . I never fit in," said Genevieve, holding very still in her shackles.

"Huh?" said Joanie.

'I never fit in. Recalcitrant fools, don't you see? People are recalcitrant, surly fools who never have any idea what's good for them. Do you know what's good for them? I'll tell you! To be like me! Exactly like me! It's my burden, my responsibility, don't you see?"

Her voice was shrill and ragged.

"Oh, Genevieve," Joanie murmured, her heart thudding with a mixture of horror, pity, and something else . . . something uncomfortable, which she could not quite bring herself to name.

Just then Thurber scurried back into the room with a syringe of pink liquid. "Here. Here. Let me give you the shot."

Joanie pushed a little harder on Genevieve's head. Stray drops of blood fell from her nose onto Genevieve's cheek. She held the tattoo machine poised. "Don't try any fast ones, Thurber," she said. "If there's anything but armadillo antidote in that thing, I'm warning you, it won't take more than a second or two to mess up Genevieve's face."

Moving like a mouse, Thurber pushed up Joanie's sleeve and emptied the syringe into her arm.

"Now will you leave us alone?" he said in a high, whining voice.

"No way, chump," said Joanie. "Not until I'm sure this stuff is gonna work." She remained seated on Genevieve's stomach.

In a few minutes Joanie's spine began to tingle. She reached under her sweater and felt her back. The bony plates seemed smaller.

"O.K., Thurber. Get me a mirror. If everything looks O.K., I'll go away."

Thurber brought a silver hand mirror with art nouveau designs on the back.

"There. Are you satisfied now?" he asked.

Joanie looked at her face. The skin had regained its usual healthy pinkness — except for her nose, which was bloody, swollen, and beginning

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to turn black and blue.

She opened her mouth. It was not her imagination. Her teeth were smaller and sharper than they used to be. They had not gone back to normal.

"Hey, what about my teeth?" said Joanie.

"It's a glitch in the antidote," said Genevieve, lifting her head off the floor. "I'm an old woman, and I have rheumatism. Will you kindly let me get up?" Her voice was regaining some of its usual firmness and clarity.

"What do you mean, a glitch?"

"Look closely. They're not armadillo teeth. They're Genevieve's teeth," said Thurber. "Armadillos are vegetarians. They have flat teeth."

Joanie looked in the mirror and shuddered.

Thurber peered over her shoulder, a faint sparkle in his eyes. "Look at those ridges and cutting surfaces. Magnificent, don't you think? When we designed the original formula, we tried a lot of teeth . . . the army wanted sharp ones, of course . . . but in the end nothing worked as well as a set modeled after Genevieve's own, which are unique in the natural world."

Joanie turned around and glared at him. He pulled his head back, tortoise style. "I don't care how great you think they are. *I* want my old ones."

Thurber's Adam's apple did three rapid bobs. "Sorry," he muttered.

"Sorry! What *is* this? You mean you expect me to go around smiling like a piranha for the rest of my life?"

"Please, dear. I'm in pain," said Genevieve, squirming slightly.

"All right, but don't try anything funny," said Joanie.

Genevieve staggered to her feet and shuffled over to one of the kitchen chairs. Her hair was wild and bloodstained. In the shackles, she looked like an apparition from the Bastille.

"Mind if I have a drink, dear?" she said.

"Not at all," said Joanie, wondering whether surprise showed on her face.

Genevieve stared at the bottle and sighed. The sigh made Joanie feel vaguely awkward, though she couldn't say why at first. Then she realized that, with her hands fastened behind her back, Genevieve could not lift a glass to her mouth.

Joanie wiped her nose again. "Is this a trick?" she said.

"My dear, I give you my personal guarantee. I haven't the energy left for any tricks," replied Genevieve.

Cautiously, Joanie unlocked the shackle from Genevieve's left wrist.

Genevieve lifted the bourbon bottle in both hands and tipped it to her mouth. "Here, Thurber. Want some?"

Thurber nodded and took a quick swallow, then passed the bottle to Joanie. Astonished, she realized that she was drinking with them.

"All right," she said. "What are

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you going to do about my teeth?"

"Have another drink," said Genevieve. "You're stuck with them, I'm afraid."

"Jesus, you mean forever?"

"Forever." Genevieve flashed her sharp, sweet smile. "We found an antidote for armadillo. But we could never find one for Genevieve."

Joanie blinked. She poured a considerable amount of bourbon into a teacup and sipped it quietly.

After a while, she said, "What did you mean, you never fit in?"

Genevieve's dangling shackles clinked as she picked up the bottle again. "Look at me. I never fit in," she said. She squinted at Joanie. "Better watch your step, dear. You're a lot like me. Cheers."

Joanie raised her teacup and chuckled. Leaning back in her chair, she lit a cigar and considered the joyous prospect of opening a tattoo parlor on Mercer Street, next door to the butcher with the rabbits in his window.

The hell I am, she thought.

FILMS: from page 79

between deserts and the rise of Messiahs in such barren lands, and in an instant I had my canvas, the planet Arrakis, called Dune."

Herbert was the god-emperor of Dune, and De Laurentiis was the great sandworm he rode to the big screen. But in that game of gods and businessmen the rules change at the whim of the players, and not even the god-emperor of Dune could triumph over the derangement of the priests of the fabled Black Tower.

This has been a true story.

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In this suspenseful tale by Mike Conner ("Five Mercies," March 1984), we experience things that "go bump" in the night of space..

Fergussen's Wraith

BY
MIKE CONNER

I

He wasn't a pretty sight, that poor frozen bastard tumbling over and over in the light-dark with his snapped life-support hose whipping after him and the inside of his faceplate, when you could see it, red with his own boiled blood. They caught him in a net and pulled him into the rescue ship. Another Vestcasa tug pilot dead: number fourteen, to be precise.

Sims, the Hell's Gate traffic manager, sighed and turned off the viewer. "That was the day before yesterday, " he said. I offered him a smoke.

"I thought the project was shut down."

"It is. This guy was supervisory on his way to dumping half a load of sodium into the Tube. Had to be done — upper winds have really been battering it the last week."

"O.K." I blew smoke. "What about the telemetry?" I'd seen the look Sims was wearing before: He was a technician glassy-eyed because his numbers were betraying him.

"The same. Increased heart rate and breathing — right up to the time communications went out."

"No radio contact this time, either?"

"Nothing."

"O.K." I stood up, stubbed the cigarette. "Can I borrow the tape? I'd like to view it again before I talk to Vargas."

"Take it all," Sims said, pushing the stuff his office had collected on the suicides over to my side of the desk. "I don't need it anymore — just got my transfer to Pluto." He shivered.

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I pulled the tape from the machine. Lucky you. Don't forget to pack your suntan lotion."

Actually, I felt sorry for Sims. From everything I'd heard, he was one of Vestcasa's best unit managers, and he'd been on the Hell's Gate project from the start. His performance reports had been glowing — until pilots started self-destructing and their union had shut the Gate down. When Sims couldn't get a handle on the situation, the company had been forced to call me. I'd handled investigations for Vestcasa before; my last had blown the lid on a couple of jokers who'd siphoned $10 mill selling Vestcasa its own machinery — a neat bit of work which impressed Vargas enough to ask for my services here on Hell's Gate. My retainer was modest, but the contingency fee was enough to knock my hat off.

Besides, I'd never been to Venus before.

Hell's Gate itself was a support station orbiting the Yellow Planet. It was pretty austere, all exposed plumbing along the rust-streaked plating, and cold to boot — but it did have a visitor's lounge. I'd left Vargas a message that I'd be there when he was ready to talk to me.

As bars went, this one wasn't bad, boasting a dazzling view of Venus and her arrow-shaped cloud bands. If you concentrated, and knew where to look, you could see the dark vortex around the top of the Fergussen Convection Tube: part of a pilot scheme to terraform the planet.

I took a stool and ordered dark rum. What I got was a filmy highball glass with a finger and a half of amber liquid.

"This isn't rum, " I said, very politely. The bartender came over, sipped from my glass. "Yeah it is, " he said, walking away.

I was straining to think of a snappy comeback when a voice from the past hit me like a slap to the face. "Stick to the plain stuff around here, Burke."

It was Molly Noah. Molly and I are in the same line of work. It was highly unlikely that she was here as a tourist. She sauntered over, grinning beneath her trademark fedora. If I'd been an animal I'd have definitely started growling.

"What a surprise," I said. "Didn't know you were thinking of buying property on Venus."

She stuck a finger into my glass, stirred it twice, then flicked the liquid into my face. It was just like old times.

"You got that tape from Sims," she said, eyeing the cassette in front of me. "What do you make of it?"

My stomach twisted into a little knot. It was a good bet that Molly Noah carried a contract with the same terms mine had. Vestcasa was famous for many things, but integrity wasn't one of them.

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"Looks promising."

"Bull-pucky, Burke, this one isn't any different than the others. Radio contact broken, air lock opens, out steps the pilot. The only difference is that this guy wasn't union."

I smiled snidely. "Pretty good for two days' work."

She ignored the crack. "There're thirty-four pilots on the Gate. Fourteen are women. They all make the same run on random shifts. But all the suicides were men."

"Since you got here?" I drawled.

"Don't be stupid, Burke. I want to work together on this."

"Sorry, Mol. I'd planned on retiring on that fee."

She looked stunned. After opening up with me like that, she hadn't counted on my refusing her offer. "Look," she said, "at least think about it." Molly was bending over backward.

"You know I work alone. Besides, we've got styles. This is a big station. Big space. Big planet. If my luck holds, we should run into each other at the Poirot banquet next April. Atlantic City." She was getting red in the face as I saluted her with my drink. "See you there, Molly."

II

About an hour later, Don Antonio Gonsalves y Vargas, Vestcasa's chairman of the board and president of the company's ex-T operations division, sent word that he was ready to see me in his office on the other side of the Hell's Gate rim. I rode there in a cute blue and red Vestcasa cart, almost forgetting about meeting Molly. Vargas'secretary showed me into a suite that was plush compared with the rest of the station, but not what you'd expect for someone with Vargas's kind of clout. There were a couple of spectacular holomurals of Venerean vistas, taken with equipment on the Fergussen Tube. A scale of it sat on a plexi-covered stand under a spotlight in a far corner.

"Burke? Have a seat."

Vargas had one of those phlegmy voices that made you clear your own throat. He had shiny, dark skin, faintly Oriental eyes, and a sparse mustache. What he reminded me of was a wax statue of the old film star Charles Bronson I'd seen once in Madame Tussaud's.

Molly Noah was sitting right next to his desk.

I did my best to ignore her. At least I wasn't coming in cold. I'd gone over the personnel files for the fourteen deceased pilots since I'd seen her last.

Vargas inhaled a glass of orange juice. "I was just on the horn with Frank Myer."

"Head of the ISTPU," Molly prompted.

"He's informed me that the Teamsters are gonna honor their pickets. The Gate's shut down." He got up and strolled to his model.

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"Two points, Burke. One, this Tube's got to be serviced. It's got an internal power system running on a sustained subnuclear reaction that keeps the virtual field intact. We feed alkali into the pans — tons every day. They filter down and react with the CO_2 in the atmosphere, and precipitate carbonates that don't break down in the surface heat. The whole idea is to eventually precipitate enough carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere to eliminate the greenhouse effect." He coughed and wiped his eyes. "Have either of you ever made toffee?"

"Oh, I love it."

"Well, Miss Noah, you know that it's a delicate matter to keep the sugar cooking at the proper temperature. Too little heat, and you've got soggy goo; too much, — and it turns brittle. Cracks. We're in danger of cracking down there if we don't resume loading soon."

"How soon?" I asked.

"No more than a week. Second point. I can tell, Mr. Burke, that you aren't thrilled to have your colleague called in on this thing. You figure you can handle it alone." I opened my mouth to affirm that, but he stared me down and went on. "You also think I'm trying to four-flush you somehow. Cheat you!" His eyes sparkled when he said the word cheat.

"Well I'm not!" he boomed. "The fact of the matter is you and Miss Noah are the two best industrial investigators I know. You talked to Sims. We're stumped. That's why I called you." He moved back to his desk with a pained grimace. "Damn phlebitis. . . . Anyway, these pilots are as superstitious a bunch of assholes as you'd ever want to meet. You'd think with their training and so-called intelligence that wouldn't be true, but it is. Stories I've heard! Phantom ships, curses. Succubi! The kind of crap you thought sank with the last four-master."

Vargas coughed again, so hard I was ready to clout him between his shoulder blades — until he drilled me again with his brown-eyed stare.

"They're as nuts as that goddamned Fergussen."

"Who's Fergussen?" I had to be the one ask.

"The man who designed that thing!" Vargas roared. "Why the hell d'you think we call it a *Fergussen* Tube? He was eccentric as hell, a preacher — but I put up with it because he was damn good. Are you good, Burke?"

Mol got a big kick when he wouldn't let me answer. "Never mind! All I want are results. That Tube's getting dangerously weak, and she'll go if we don't start loading alkali into those pans again. So get hopping. As far as your antipathy to Miss Noah is concerned, I don't care if you work piggyback, so long as you find out what the hell's going on. I'm hoping you'll encourage each other. Our fee's structured on that basis. Find out what's killing my people, Burke so I can set-

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tle this goddamned strike! Understood?"

"Perfectly," Molly said. When I opened my mouth to answer, he started hacking again. It was as good a dismissal as any, and neither of us wasted any time leaving his office.

For appearance's sake, I gave Mol a ride in the cart. I let her enjoy herself for a minute or two. When we passed the entrance to the main docking bays, crowded with picketing Teamsters, I finally spoke up.

"Just to let you know I'm not slouching, Molly, I took your hint and went through the personnel files of the victims."

"And?"

"There were a couple of other correlations." I gave the strikers a clenched-fist salute. One of them told me what I could do with my fist.

"But you're not telling me what they are."

"Sure I am. I believe in tat for tit." She folded her arms. "Besides being all men, as you so astutely pointed out, those guys were all single or widowed men. No homophile skew in the sex profile — which is unusual for deep-space personnel. And they were all middle-aged — no rookies or really old hands."

She pursed her lips thoughtfully. "So it could be a disease . . . or a psychological condition that attacks that particular profile."

"I'm not ready to make any conclusions yet. Just wanted to toss that out to you." I halted the cart. "Well, I've got somebody here I've got to talk to. Au revoir, Miz Molly."

"Wait a minute. Shouldn't we coordinate our efforts?"

"Look, we'd just drive each other crazy. You're too methodical for me. I shoot from the hip, and you don't like that. We'd be wasting time fighting each other."

"But Vargas said—"

"I don't give a shit about that old lizard," I lied. There were certain questions about Vargas and his financial connections to the Gate I intended following up on later. There was no use covering each other's tracks.

"See you in Atlantic City, sucker," she hissed, squealing off. That gave me the best laugh I'd had since I got to the Gate.

III

Molly prided herself on her connections with the ISTPU — the International Space Transport Pilot's Union — but I had a few myself. The appointment I'd made was with Kel Dbhouti, a pilot I'd known from my days with the Houston Police Department. Then, he'd helped me with a petroleum transport scam; now, he just happened to fit my victim profile: forty-five, a bachelor, and reputedly a lusty one at that.

The bay he'd told me to meet him at turned out to be a gymnasium. I found Kel down toward the station core, slamming the ball around a low-

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grav squash court. He was a big guy, bald as as rock, who might have passed for a jinni in old Arabia. His laughter boomed around the court as he pumped my hand.

"Eddie Burke. Still sneaky-looking as ever. Grab yourself a racket and stick-shoes. We can talk inside."

Athletics aren't exactly my forte, but I checked out the equipment, took off my coat, and rolled up my trousers. Kel advised me to try running around the walls a few times to get use to the feel of the shoes. I did, but I didn't. He started hitting the ball around.

"So Vargas sent for you, huh?" I smashed the ball back. "Shows he's finally taking this thing seriously — about nine guys too late."

"Guess you knew most of the dead men."

"All of 'em. Good people, every one. Steady. Been through every situation you could face out there — engine blowups, the worst." He was telling me this from the ceiling. "Serve it."

"None of them had what you'd call emotional problems?"

"Couple drank more than they should. At least one was a reefer freak — but only after shift. They'd lose their rating otherwise." His return nearly took my head off. "I've been over this with Sims a dozen times. Still can't figure it out. Crazy."

"O.K." I hit a nice forehand from halfway up the wall. "Why don't you tell me about the run these guys were making."

"Nothing much to tell. Your basic tug pulling a net full of sodium or potassium shipped in from Merc. You've got to spiral in toward the planet and dump it into the pan fields around the lip of the Tube. That's a target 14 kilometers wide at an altitude of 137 kilometers, well above the cloud tops." Smash. "It's tricky. You've got to go suborbital. Venus rotates so slowly you're not getting any help matching speeds. The idea is to let gravity pull in to where there's enough atmosphere for your 'static foils to bite. Your metal'll start glowing — there's enough free atomic oxygen to burn some of it. A tug, by the time it's ready to drop a load —" Kel blooped one I had to go to the ceiling for — "will leave a contrail six, seven hundred K's long. When you get to a certain point, which you hope your onboards have calculated correctly, you cut the net loose."

I halted, stuck to the roof. "Then what?"

"The stuff goes down the Tube."

Which is what happened to me: my shoes released with a sucking noise, and I dropped onto my shoulder. Kel helped me up. "Got to keep moving, Eddie — those shoes won't hold you forever."

"Thanks for the warning," I winced, rubbing my shoulder. "The guys who died didn't make it to the pans, though."

"Still orbital, final approach." Fi-

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nally, he let the ball roll dead. "Whatever hit them centers twenty-five hundred K's west of the pans. In an area the instruments sometimes go haywire in. Supposedly from magnetic flux. There's a mascon underneath — Tube's anchored to it."

"You think that could have affected the victim's judgment somehow?"

"Who knows? Maybe they thought their ships were about to blow. Bugged out, hoping for a pickup later."

"But why suitless? Or with an umbilicus, instead of an EVA pack?"

He wiped sweat off the shining top of his head. "Some of the guys have been saying that whatever's doing it is the same thing that got Fergie."

"Fergie?"

"Jamie Fergussen."

"The Tube Fergussen, you mean?"

"Yeah. He was in his pod down next to the Tube about three months ago when the thing decompressed. Never even found his body."

"Hm. According to Vargas, he was a little strange."

"He was religious, which pegs him as strange in Vargas's book. A Presbyterian deacon, as a matter of fact. He'd spout chapter and verse if you let him, but down there he knew what he was doing. There wasn't anything wrong with the pod. Whatever happened must have been damn heavy. Nuts."

"O.K., Kel, thanks." I squeezed my injured shoulder. "Listen, I know you're on the strike committee, and I know you're picketing the launch bays, but is there a chance you can get me aboard a tug or a shuttle?"

"Maybe. What for?"

"I'd like to ride down to those coordinates you mentioned. None of your pilots has to go if you can program a run with the guidance computer."

"I'll take care of it. Call me tomorrow first thing."

"Great. Thanks for the game, pal. And listen, when I get back, let's talk about those theories you call nuts, O.K.?"

His answer was lost in the report of the ball flattening itself against the far wall.

IV

I spent the better part of the evening making a few discreet inquiries about Vargas's financial connection with the whole Hell's Gate scene, and coming up with a fat zero. According to my East Coast sources, the Gate was more or less a PR gamble, the kind of big, splashy project that looked good on the video brochures when Vestcasa salespeople were pushing interocean tidal generating systems on backwater planets with sixteen consonants in their names. Vargas, as chairman and head of ex-T operations, naturally had the usual incentives and bonus clauses in his contract, but nothing out of the ordinary,

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considering his position. The Tube itself wasn't insurable, though the station and support facilities were; besides that, most of the captalization costs had already been written off. So, it didn't seem to make sense for either Vargas or the company to deep-six the thing.

Frankly, I was disappointed — it would have been nice to nail Vargas after his double-dealing — but I decided it would be a waste of time to pursue that angle any further. Instead I strolled over to the sick bay to have a chat with the preflight medical officer.

She got huffy when I asked to see the records of her deceased former patients, but cooled down when I mentioned Kel Dbhouti. Pulling clout like that wasn't much satisfaction against striking out again. All the preflight physicals checked out the same: no reports of illness, no unusual dietary deviations or too-recent debauches. About the only thing I discovered was that in the two months since the first pilot had bugged out, Kel Dbhouti had made the alkali run almost two dozen times. Either he was lucky, or immune somehow to what was happening out there.

I went back to my cabin thinking how unhappy my bankers would be if I did not return with that Vestcasa check. Besides that, my shoulder was really throbbing. I'd been tempted to ask the doc to check it out, but didn't want to be grounded for the flight Kel was arranging. So I just bit my tongue, pulled off my shirt as best I could, and collapsed to the bunk.

Sim's tape was still in my viewer. I punched it on and stared at the tumbling figure. He looked like a wooden man spinning round and round in a pool of black water. I was frustrated enough to think twice about calling Molly and offering to swap information.

One thing about Eddie Burke, though: Adversity only thickens his head.

V

I woke up feeling like red-hot talons were sunk into the meaty part on top of my left arm. When I tried to move, they sunk a little deeper, but nothing was going to keep me from that Venus run. I discovered that if I hooked my thumb into a belt loop, I looked almost casual. It would have to do.

Kel was waiting for me at the bays, a good thing, since some of the pickets didn't look too happy about my grabbing a flight off the Gate. The big man ushered me into a Green Room and tossed me a set of coveralls with sensor leads flopping from the chest.

"Put these on. The leads plug into the dash. I've put tape over the jacks you'll use.

"No pressure suit?"

"You'd just be uncomfortable. Besides — he lowered his desert eyes at me — "a suit didn't do any of the others any good."

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"O.K. Ah, would you mind? I'm a little shy about undressing. Catholic, you know?"

He left me alone — a good thing, too, because I damn near passed out trying to get my arm into the coverall. When I did there were no more belt loops to grab; I wrapped my fingers around the sensor leads instead and went out to find Kel. He was at a launch console, checking the run program a final time.

"You'll be out about six hours," he said without looking up. "I've left a couple of magazines inside the No. 3 locker. It can get real boring out there."

"I'll bet."

Then he handed me an amber slab of plastic with a tiny grill on one end. "I want you to take this. It's a crystal-stack recorder. Just in case the onboard unit fails. Talk into it if anything happens."

I got a real thrill when he said that, especially the way he was shaking my hand like it was the last time he'd be seeing me. I pocketed the recorder.

"Burke? Good, you haven't left yet." It was Molly, dressed up in a coverall. "We'll launch together."

"Who the hell are you?" Kel growled.

"This is Molly Noah. The other investigator. I'm surprised you haven't bumped into each other before this."

"Well, whoever you are, you're not going anywhere.

"Oh, no? I've got authorization from Vargas right here. *And* a release form the strike committee of the ISTPU complete with Frank Myer's signature, if you'd care to see it." She waved the documents in front of Dbhouti's face, and, for a second, I thought he might slug her. Not everybody can take Molly's style. Finally he nodded: "All right. You take Bay 14. Burke, you have 17. I'll seal hatches from here."

I was steaming, so mad in fact that I forgot to hang onto the plugs and went stomping down the bay ramp with the gimpy arm hanging uselessly at my side. Then, as I fit myself through the hatches, the encouraging thought hit me that Mol couldn't be doing very well following leads on the Gate, either. While that wouldn't mollify my bankers, it did salve my ego slightly.

The inside of the shuttle was all business. Most of the switches were protected by flipped-down caps. There was a little hand-lettered card taped above the primary screen that said HANDS OFF; I wondered if Kel would have given Mol the same warning. She'd been a pilot herself before switching to the easy-money game. Knowing her, I supposed she kept the rating current. I fit my headset as the air lock hissed shut in back of me.

"Strapped in, Eddie?"

"Nice and tight." The screens popped on; I could see part of the Gate's hub, and at least a dozen strike-idled ships. Venus took the other half of the view.

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"O.K., get ready for a boost." Too bad he didn't say when. I tried to brace myself, but when my shuttle flew out of its bay, I felt like I'd been stomped by a two-meter boot. I yelled — couldn't help it; the pain in my shoulder made me crazy. The next thing I heard was Molly, chuckling over the ship-to ship.

"Miss your mommy, Burke?"

My heart was pounding, and Hell's Gate was already smaller on the screens. It was time to get a few digs of my own in.

"Not having much luck, were you?" My voice was as snide as it gets.

"Wouldn't say that. In fact, I discovered an interesting bit of tape from the flight record of victim No. 8, Victor Wu. I got someone in data processing to filter most of the static and reconstruct a portion of the voice channel just before the poor man vented his ship. Three words: 'Beautiful. Too Beautiful.'"

"That's two words." But I was interested. "Hallucination?"

"It's consistent with the telemetry, especially the theta waves on the brain wave channel. There were theta episodes on at least six of the tapes."

"So why aren't you following up on that now instead of tagging along with me?"

"Vargas told me what you had in mind. I was worried about you, Burke. And I knew you'd never take me on as a copilot, so—"

That sunk it. On top of my aching shoulder and hurt pride, now I was being patronized. "Screw off, Noah!" I yelped, cutting the ship-to-ship. Truly, I had had enough.

VI

Kel's idea of a good read was aerospace magazines with ads for things like colloidal-titanium fasteners; fortunately, somebody else had left a tattered paperback novel that tried to be steamy and wasn't half-bad. The closer I came to the good part, the bigger Venus got. By the time the hero had been retired to a stud farm to graze on steaks in his old age, Venus was no longer a globe but a sweeping smear of yellow across the screens. You could see clouds being sucked into arrow-shaped jet streams covering half a hemisphere. In darker places between the clouds, heat lightning strobed at a rate that could get you a migraine in about two seconds. It was truly an ugly place.

Just inside the limb was a dark depression with a barely perceptible spiral structure: the pan fields. The screens switched to a schematic superimposed over the Venerean cloudscape, with the pans circled and radiating an expanding grid toward my tug's position.

"O.K., Eddie, you're a couple minutes from episode radius." His term for the approximate location of the fatalities. "I'd like you to start recording."

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"Right." I decided to reopen the ship-to ship, too. It was getting lonely *out here, and I'd cooled off — guess* it was the novel I'd read. I flipped the switch and hailed my rival.

"Still there, Mol?"

"Right on your tail. It's quite a view."

"I hope you're referring to Venus," I said, picking up Kel's little recorder. "Burke, on final approach to Tube pans. It's a real yellow mess down there. Pans are darker and look like they're spinning. I can make out the central vortex. There's a plume of sulfates and CO_2 ice over it — I guess that's where the VQ tankers collect the minerals Vestcasa sells farther out. How am I doing, Kel?"

"You ought to have some slides to go with that narration."

"Thanks a lot." I checked the screens again. The image was snowy now and starting to jump a little. "How far are we from that macron you were talking about?

"Maybe seven hun—" I couldn't get the rest because of the static.

"Having communications trouble, as predicted. You still there, Molly?"

"Burke, I'm moving up and keeping station 'til we leave the vicinity.

"No! Stay—" I halted because I thought my eyes were going. The inside of my cabin was filling up with a fine mist. I kept blinking, but it wouldn't go away. "Hey Molly—"

I had to pull off the headset because of the static. The fog got thicker. "Come on, man, " I whispered to myself. "You're on a preset trajectory, *nothing to worry about.*" I remembered the recorder. "Lost contact with the Gate, and with Molly's tug. Not sure if my altitude and trajectory readouts are correct, though Kel advised me that the instruments would freak out at these coordinates."

And so do the pilots, I reminded myself.

"Uh, the fog's contracting now, resolving into some sort of form. I'm getting tense watching, like I want it to *become* something. Has to be my imagination."

But it was more. I was getting a feeling I hadn't experienced in years. A newness . . . a thrill, the kind you get kissing a girl the first time, I mean really kissing her. I was light-headed, hot and cold at the same time. Then:

"Wow! It just got solid, still rolling around, but something definite's coming out now . . . it's a person . . . a woman! Sweet Jesus, it's a woman, tumbling around here with me!"

I couldn't take my eyes off her. One part of me insisted it was an illusion, but another part — a *physical* part — reacted as though she were real. She was the most physically astonishing female I'd ever had the privilege of seeing. I tried to describe her.

"Her skin's rich, like ivory, something warm about it. She's got long, graceful arms, with bright red nails on her fingertips. . . . She . . . she

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keeps brushing the inside of her thighs with them, looking at me. Her hair's like a cloud of amber, as though she were floating in warm blue water. Lips . . . same color as her nails . . . and they're moving, calling my name. She's calling me!"

I dropped the recorder, shivering like a puppy. Her voice seemed to caress the length of my spine: *Burke . . . I want you, Burke.* I had no doubt that she did, and right then I knew what Ulysses must have felt, tied to his mast. I wanted her. She was everything. I forgot who I was, where I was. She floated back into the hatches, and I unbuckled to go after her.

The tension was like molten lead poured into my throat and sizzling inside my gut. All I had to do to open the hatch was spin a ratchet, but I was in agony because of my useless arm — couldn't brace myself to gain the advantage I needed to turn the lever. Somehow, after what seemed a year, I wedged myself over the couch and managed to release it. I was sweating, crying, cursing, ready to come, all at the same time.

Then the hatch cover swung open. Whimpering, I scrambled into the air lock tunnel, the inner hatch ramming my rear as it automatically shut. I didn't feel it. I couldn't feel anything but my name, reverberating through my muscles and bones. I groped around for the outer hatch switch, found it, tears streaming down my face. I hit the switch with my fist, lunging with the sound of venting air straight into her waiting, white-hot arms. . . .

VII

Lucky for me the arms belonged to Molly Noah. Worried, she'd docked with my tug just before I got the outer hatch opened. She'd had her hands full for a while after that, too. I kicked and screamed and landed a couple to her face before she cold-cocked me with a karate chop.

At least that's what she told me later. I was pretty much of a mess for the couple of hours it took us to get back to the Gate.

I came to, gagging on the brandy she was trickling down my throat.

"Burke? How do you feel?"

"Terrific, " I sputtered. "Who the hell taped my arm?" Then I noticed the mouse under her eye. "Hey, you finally won your division. Lightweight."

"Burke, you tried bugging out of the tug."

I remembered then. My humiliation must have showed because of how concerned she looked. I said, "I couldn't get the goddamned hatch open fast enough."

Her green eyes were wide. "What happened out there?"

"A woman. I saw . . ." My voice trailed off, then: "Where's Kel?"

"Down securing the tugs."

"Tell him to meet us in Vargas's

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office in ten minutes. With that recorder I had."

It made me feel a little better that she didn't hesitate following me this time.

Wearing a white bib tied round his skinny neck, Vargas went right on demolishing a small mountain of cottage cheese while Molly and I tried to fill him in on the tug run. I kept my part as low-key as I could, emphasizing that my problems had started with the instruments. But there was no getting around that woman. I was still getting low-grade chills thinking about her.

Finally, Vargas pushed his plate aside and wiped his mouth.

"Let me get this straight, Burke. You saw a woman *beckoning* — and that's why you tried to leave your cabin?"

"I wish it weren't true, but yeah, I did."

"And you, Miss Noah. I suppose you saw two meters of nude masculinity."

"Actually, I was too busy trying to dock with Burke."

Vargas's intercom buzzed. It was Kel, and when he joined us, he did not look happy.

"Sit down, Dbhouti. These two have been telling a fascinating story. Burke tells me you've a recording that corroborates what he saw."

Kel hesitated. "I couldn't find it. It wasn't in the cabin."

"I had it. I remember using it!"

Vargas's smile was not pleasant. "Maybe he swallowed it in his excitement." He got up. "Jeezus, I hire two of the most expensive private investigators in the world, and all either of them can come up with is some cockamamy story about a vacuum-packed centerfold. You sound just like that goddamn Fergussen and his wraiths. God!" He reached into his desk for a bottle and tipped about a dozen little white pills into his mouth. Mol and I looked at each other.

"Wraiths?"

"Spooks, female spirits — I never knew what the hell he was talking about. Just that he was convinced some kind of ghost lived down by the Tube."

"Too bad we can't talk to him," I said, which probably showed I wasn't all there yet. Vargas wasn't sympathetic. He had a coughing fit.

"Why don't you hold a goddamn séance if you want to talk to him?" he screamed. After more yelling punctuated with a few graphic threats, he threw all three of us out of this office. By then I was ready to dump what was left of the cottage cheese all over his featherless head, but Mol held me back.

"What good would it do?" she said, shoving me into a cart.

"Make me feel a lot better. What happened to that recorder, Kel?"

"Beats me. I looked in both cabins, too."

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Molly said, "Kel, what do you know about the pod Fergussen died in?"

"It was a command center for the automated stuff that supports the Tube — anchors, carbonate spillways. Fergussen controlled their construction before the VQ was assumed. He was at thirty-five kilometers, just below where the cloud cover breaks up."

"Did he ever mention these wraiths to you? Mol asked.

Kel's expression turned hard-eyed. "He might have mumbled something about spirits once. I didn't pay much attention. He was always talking about the devil if you let him." Kel stopped the cart. "I've got a meeting with the strike committee. I'll tell 'em your flight was without incident."

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it, Eddie. Hey, listen, if you're so interested in Fergie, his old suite's up on 4 level. Sealed off since the company finished its investigation, but I think I can arrange for a short tour. If you thought it might help."

"I do."

"All right, give me a couple of hours and I'll see what I can do. O.K., Eddie?" When he punched my poor shoulder I almost fainted. "Try the whirlpool, shamus," he chuckled, jogging off. Molly stared after him, fingering her hat brim.

"I know that look," I said. "What gives?"

"Huh? Oh, nothing. . . . He's just been so helpful. Well. Grab yourself some lunch, Burke, and I'll see you later."

VIII

I felt much better by the time I met Molly and Kel on 4 level a couple of hours later. My Venerean nightmare had faded to the point where I wasn't quite so ashamed of myself.

Getting into Fergussen's rooms wasn't a big deal. Kel had the lock code; the company seal he simply twisted off and pocketed.

"All yours. Let me know if you find anything interesting."

"Why don't you stick around?"

"Uh-uh. Don't want to make the committee look bad. Later."

As we went inside, Mol said, "He's probably right. Some of the female pilots took a straw vote to start flying again. Two pilots per flight. Kel had to tell them what happened to you."

"And how do we know that?"

She took a lipstick case from her bag, pulled on its base. Out popped a metal umbrella. "Microwave scanner. Handy gadget to have around."

"Quit showing off," I snapped, though my heart wasn't in it. I knew I owed her a big one after what had happened over the pans.

I got the lights on. The place had that linty smell and everything was covered with dust. Books and tapes were scattered all over the deck.

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"He couldn't have been this disorganized," Molly said.

"Why not? Genius seeks order, doesn't it?"

"Maybe." Mol peered into a file cabinet. "But the man was a Presbyterian deacon. That type tends to be neat."

"I'm sure the company's been through this a couple of times, Molly. With Vargas on their tails, they might have been in a hurry."

"Burke, come here." She switched on a lamp over a metal desk that was skewed in a corner of the cabin. There was a yellow desk pad scrawled with calculations and doodles, mostly in the shape of cones or funnels. "Look at this."

She had her finger on two neatly printed lines with a heavy box around them:

I dream't yestreen her deadly wraith I saw,
Gang by my ein as whit's the driven snaw. . . .

"Snaw?"

"Scots dialect. You described what you saw as having white skin. Vargas mentioned wraith as well."

I pulled a dictionary from a shelf behind the desk. "I've been wondering about that word. Let's see: 'Noun, an apparition of a living person, reputed to portend or indicate death.' Or, 'a visible spirit.' Seems to fit what I saw."

"Doesn't it?" Molly was fingering her hat again. "Check his sleeper, O.K.?"

This room was as austere as you'd expect of a man who'd never married, and who probably hadn't much use for sleep, either. A bare mattress stuck out from a rollout shelf. The dresser drawers — all empty — were pulled out, all of them but the bottom one. It was jammed, but I managed to yank it open. When I did, something hit my foot.

I picked up what turned out to be raunchy magazines, bundled with string tied into a neat bow. I yelled for Molly.

"Looks like the preacher was slightly twisted," I laughed, pulling magazines from the bundle. Then I stopped, dropping what I had in my hand.

"That's her!" My heart was hammering instantly.

"What are you talking about, Burke?"

I pointed to a torn-out centerfold of a woman with skin of warm ivory, amber hair, with lips and nails drawn in vivid red ink.

"She's what I saw out there. Fergussen's wraith!"

IX

Getting Vargas to agree to let us use a VQ tanker for a run to Fergussen's pod wasn't easy — I practically had to rub his face in the pic-

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ture of the Scot's secret love before he finally gave the order. Even then, Kel told us it would take seven or eight hours to get the tanker's VQ fields charged to a level that would protect us in the lower reaches of the Venerean atmosphere. I used the time to have a talk with Morris Hinds, a quick little man who handled the weather projections on the Gate.

He was busy charting an anticyclonic disturbance that threatened the Tube — or so he said: I didn't have the faintest idea what all the convoluted lines on his big green screen meant.

"Jamie? Sure I remember him. We worked very closely together just before the Tube was kindled. Spent a few days with him in the pod." Hinds shuddered. "Personally, don't know how he could stand it."

"How so?"

"Pardon me." Hinds reached over and punched some bytes into a keypad. "How much do you know about Venus?"

"Not much, " I admitted. "That's why I wanted to talk to you."

"Well, that cabin was tiny. Can't move without bumping something. Venus is pressing down on you with about ten atmospheres. Not for the claustrophobic. Worst thing was, Fergie always kept the screens open. Couldn't see much but the bottoms of the clouds racing by. And the damn lightning never stops flashing. I'd beg him to close those damn screens, but he'd just laugh. When I got back up here I swore that was the last visit I'd make."

"Tell me, when's the last time you saw him?"

"He came upstairs about four days before he died. Pretty shaken up when I saw him, too — the pod'd been in a bad storm for almost three days, with a lot of the systems knocked out. He told me that he and Dbhouti had had the most terrifying experience of their lives." Hinds looked up. "'Terrible and wondrous,'" he said. His exact words. Wouldn't say exactly what happened, though."

"Dbhouti — you mean Kel Dbhouti was with him there once?"

"More than once. Dbhouti made the regular supply runs to the pod."

I nodded as offhandedly as I could. O.K., Dr. Hinds, I appreciate the information. By the way" — I pointed to his weather chart — "any update on that storm?"

"Seems to be moving faster than I anticipated. Might hit the Tube in six, maybe five hours. Wouldn't want to be down there when it does."

"Thanks, Doc," I said, running off to find Molly.

X

We found each other in the bar, and she didn't waste any time telling me what she had.

"Fergussen dictated daily reports to his office in Glasgow. Mostly tech-

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nical stuff, like you'd expect. But the last week — well, look at this."

I scanned the first few pages, which read like a love letter to an unnamed suitor who was being threatened by something. One was an especially steamy poem:

You who will never die
Whose vacant arms reach out to cradle me
In an embrace you think to be the last;
Take heart!
Your lips are mine
Your eyes
Your legs and every part of you between
belong to me.
I am your Protector
I am your Salvation
I know what you Are
Lover lightning!

"He should have stuck to engineering," I said. "They let him send this stuff over the Vestcasa wire?"

"It was in numeric code, a simple binary sequence. I broke it myself in half an hour." She rubbed her eyes. "What do you make of that?"

"Jibes with what I've heard of Fergie's last days. Which was considerably more than Kel told us. He and Fergussen were caught in a storm down there."

She nodded. "I've had a feeling about that man."

"Hold on, I'm not accusing Kel of anything. He's been our only lead. I think he's just being cautious.".

"I'm not so sure. We've got pilots dying for no reason that makes sense."

"And Kel's on the strike committee trying to keep it from happening again. I think you're getting a little anxious for that fee, Mol."

"Tell me about it, bugout!"

We were standing nose to nose. "Since you've made up your mind already," I said, "I suppose you don't need to make this run."

"Oh, no. I'm going. You'd better thank your lucky stars I'm going." She flicked her hat brim and left me alone.

"Maybe she should just go," I mumbled, following her down to the bays.

XI

VQ power is one of those innovations that gives laymen headaches: a kind of force field powered by its own reaction to the matter and energy it kept at bay. Its secret was the halting of the exchange of virtual particles on the subatomic level. Once kindled, it was self-perpetuating as long as conditions were right; an object enclosed in one seemed to "violate" the normal rules for the interaction of objects and forces. VQ was good for things like interstellar travel. It was also handy if you wanted to sightsee on a planet whose surface temperature was above seven hundred degrees Kelvin, with a nice pressure of maybe ninety thousand millibars.

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I had a couple of sticks of gum in case my ears started popping.

Kel was waiting for us in full pressure suit at the tanker ramp. "Let's move it. There's a mob of pilots outside that's dying to talk to you two."

We trotted up to the tanker's control module, more spacious and complicated-looking than the tug had been. Outside, stripped of its tank, it looked like the conning tower of an old Earth navy battle ship, all bridge and antennas and exposed plumbing. Once the VQ was assumed away from the Gate, though, the tanker would look just like a glowing honeydew melon. Kel fooled with controls while Molly and I strapped in — a psychological precaution, since the field also fed off inertial changes. You could stand on your head all the way to Pluto inside this thing if you wanted to.

When we cleared the Gate, Kel pulled a couple of levers that started the whole tanker humming. Over it, he said, "I'll dock with Fergie's pod and take a pressure. If it's no good, we leave."

"Fine with me," I said. Mol frowned.

"Just so you understand." He pulled a third lever. "Personally, I don't know what you think you're going to find down there."

Kel threw one last handle, and I felt my skin tingling. In ten or fifteen seconds, Kel opened his big screens.

Our tanker was caught in a yellow maelstrom. Cloud-streaks whipped past our position at incredible speed; sizzling drops of acid driven by the wind spent themselves against the VQ shield. Hinds had been right about the lightning, too — it was tough to look at for very long. White-hot bursts of it lit up Kel's face.

"Isn't this fantastic! The electrical conductivity of this layer's incredible. Ionized acids carry a current all the way around the planet. You get oppositely charged streams running parallel, and wham!" He gazed out into the storm. "It's like love. The power that illuminates and consumes."You could barely hear what he was saying. "Venus lives right here, people."

Molly folded her arms and turned her back on the fireworks. "Kel, you never did find that recorder Burke used before, did you?"

"Nope." the insane gale was blowing straight in on us. I was starting to have that same jittery stomach my goddess had given me before.

"You know, it's strange Vargas didn't order them installed in every tug."

"Shows he didn't take it very seriously. Anyway, that unit wasn't standard issue. Got it from a friend of mine." He smiled. "There's the Tube."

Imagine the whirlpool over a drain in a tub full of boiling sulfuric acid and you get the idea of the way the outside of the convection Tube looked: shimmering, rotating, curling against its own surface tension as the Venerean winds howled for it to fall.

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It split the streams of blowing acid around it, sending swirls into the gloom beyond the Tube's lee side. The lightning had already given me a headache, and now I saw Molly playing with her hat in jerky, disconnected movements.

That fog started to fill the cabin. I looked over at Kel, who had his face pressed to the screen. The fog got denser; the hairs on the back of my neck snapped to.

"We were in a storm just like this. It blew out the VQ around the pod." The tanker shook. "Two days, just me and Fergussen, listening to the rain eat at the plating, shaking with that goddamn thunder that never let up: Wham! Wham! Wham!" Molly's eyes got wide, and I didn't care, because the fog was taking shape. Didn't they see it?

"Pod shook like somebody was detonating charges right below deck." Kel laughed harshly. "Old Fergie even started praying, but after a while he couldn't remember the words anymore. I wanted to kill him . . . almost did, until—"

"Until what, Kel?" Molly sounded very far away. The tanker had drifted alongside the football-shaped pod, stuck to the side of the Tube with its VQ flickering like flames over the last of a fire.

"Until Venus."

I knew what he meant — Venus was floating right in front of me with open arms, calling my name the way she had on my first run. When I took a step toward her, she moved off, laughing.

"We were afraid . . . gone. She knew what fear was, because she was afraid of dying herself. Vargas and his Tubes . . . she knew they'd eventually wreck her world. She needs acid to live . . . to hold her current. She penetrated us, and I knew that I'd do anything to help her, anything—"

My own Venus arched her neck and disappeared into the air lock.

I heard some commotion behind me, and out of the corner of my eye I saw Kel lunge at Molly, and Molly rolling desperately out of the way, yelling "Burke! Come on—" I didn't care. I was going after Venus. It was funny — one part of me had the whole scheme covered. Kel was obsessed with the creature he believed lived in the Venerean clouds — that *was* the clouds — and to save her he'd set us up. Mol was right all along: Kel intended returning to the Gate with an empty tanker and another couple of casualties that would certainly keep the strike going. All he had to do was put Molly out of commission. Me he wasn't worried about. That should have bothered me, but it didn't because the other part of me, the one driving my legs and pumping heat into my brain, wanted only to clutch that ivory-skinned floating beauty. A few more steps and I'd have her all to myself.

The tanker started bucking. Db-

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houti had Molly by the throat, the two of them rolling across the controls. He was slapping her, again and again; me, I could almost feel Venus caressing the back of my neck with her long fingers.

"Burke—"

"He can't help you—"

Somehow, Molly got her knee up, staggering Kel. Something small and amber flipped out of his pocket and clattered to the deck. Both of them went for it at the same time but Mol was quicker, and she stomped it.

My beautiful wraith vanished.

I stood there blinking like an idiot, until I heard Molly's desperate yell. Dbhouti had her by the throat, crashing around with her like pirates fighting on a storm-tossed galleon. Considering my condition, I timed my leap perfectly, grabbing his collar ring and shoving his head into the near bulkhead. Kel went limp. The damn tanker careened like a spent top as Molly rushed to the panel.

"Field's going; I'm gonna try to dock with the pod."

"He said it wasn't pressurized—"

"We won't be, either, in about thirty seconds. Move it!"

"What about Kel?"

"Damn you, *move*." With all the subtlety of a linebacker, Mol shoved me into the air lock. The hatches closed an instant after the tanker was peeled away from the pod like a snail brushed off glass. My eyes popped like crazy, and I remembered thinking that being compressed to death wasn't such a bad way to go. Then I heard Mol's voice.

"You all right, Burke?"

I opened my eyes. "My luck," I said groggily, "this part of Paradise includes you."

"We're in the pod, Eddie."

"Quite right, Miss Noah." Whoever said it rolled his r's. Molly gasped.

"Fergussen?"

"Aye. And you, I presume, are Mr. Burke." In the dim light a man stepped forward who looked nothing like the photos of the Vestcasa engineer. He was naked, except for a good growth of brindled beard, and his eyes glittered like a drugstore engagement ring. "Dbhouti told me about you two." He paused, cocking his head as if listening to someone. "By all means, follow him down." Looking at me again, he went on, "It's only proper to pay respects. Even a bad man deserves that much, and Dbhouti at least had proper motives." Fergussen went over to the pod's small — and from the look of it, well-stocked — galley. "Would either of you care for some tea? I imagine your ride down was none to pleasant."

"Wait a minute. Whom were you talking to just now?"

"Why, my wraith, of course."

I shivered. "Why didn't I see her this time?"

Molly said, "Because what you — and all the rest — saw was a projection. Theta compulsion from that little

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'recorder'. Kel's victims were all lonely, single men, susceptible to a powerful sexual impulse. Just like you were, Burke."

"You'd better give me some of that tea, Fergie."

He handed me a steaming cup. "Aye, those little boxes were my doing, I'm afraid. I'd worked on 'em years back for the company, and when Kel found out about it, he insisted on my getting a couple for him. We tuned it to a ghastly picture Kel brought down. I would not have done it except he insisted it was the only way to save our wraith." He pulled his fingers through his beard. "I didn't find out until it was too late that he had murder on his mind. Even then, I couldn't do anything about it. We'd already 'arranged' my death so I could stay down here with her. He said he'd kill me if I ever tried contacting the Gate. Intended to kill me anyway I think. Kel was a jealous, jealous man. He wanted Venus for himself."

"And he was convinced the Tube would kill her?"

"That's it exactly, Miss Noah. Though this one unit wasn't a threat. It was Vargas's plan to install thirty-three others that would've done her in. Before long, the whole chemistry of the atmosphere would have been changed. Without the ionized acids in these clouds, she'd have hard goin' being nothing but patterns of electricity. Oh, it might take a few hundred years, but the company would've killed her eventually."

I was still dubious. "How come you didn't go to Vargas with this?"

"As I told you, Kel was a jealous man. I don't know if I can explain it to you, but when we first contacted the wraith, she was unformed. Her intelligence came out of contact with us when we were both close to death. She became what we desired most: safety, peace. That's the thing about love, Mr. Burke: Its object doesn't matter so much, as long as it becomes what we want. We love something else because it's like what we think we are. Once Dbhouti had given himself like that, he couldn't let go." Fergussen chuckled sadly. "And as for going to Vargas, well — I wonder if you've had the opportunity to converse with the old man about me?"

"He thought you were nuts," I admitted.

"So a story such as the one I'm telling you now wouldn't have altered his opinion much." Fergussen's face changed; it flushed and went slack. The expression was pure rapture. "Yes, pet," he said, "I'm sorry, too."

"She's back? What's she saying?

"Only that my Tube's about ready to go. She knows how much it meant to me . . . once. Oh, and I am being rude! Mr. Burke, Miss Noah, Venus — I mean the real Venus — would like to make your acquaintance. If you don't mind."

"Please, " Molly said.

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I was afraid of a rerun of my Ivory Lady, but what touched me was anything but that. I felt mild currents running through my body, and then something like a voice — without words — sprang up inside my mind. The touch was kind, yet strong as the winds aloft in the Venerean clouds. It was hot and dense, and frozen; it stung, and it was sweet. As I responded to it, it changed, took on something of me. Of all things, I imagined a time I'd fished a whole day when I was a kid, just sitting on a dock watching the sun bounce off the water and my bobber in patches of brightness. It was wise, and also a little sad because of what had happened.

Fergie's wraith told me about Molly, too. I'd been such a chump. Without her, I'd be a Burkesicle spinning around in orbit. Or squashed flat like Kel Dbhouti. I could feel my face getting red as Venus lightly withdrew.

Molly stared at me with a little smile on her bruised-up face. "Look, Fergie," she said, "we can't all stay down here. What if we could convince Vargas — and the pilots' union — to give in?

"We'd both be grateful. I kinda hate to see the Tube go myself."

O.K.," I said, "then Molly and I'll have a little talk with Vargas. He might be able to ignore one of us, but as a team . . ."

"Unbeatable. Let's get that radio working, partner."

• • •

XII

Convincing Vargas to come downstairs wasn't easy, especially when the old bird practically choked on his microphone after hearing what had happened to one of his tankers. But, with Mol and I alternately wheedling and stroking the company chairman, we managed to get him and Frank Myer — who'd just made the Gate — to come for a meeting with Fergie and his wraith. One talk with her was enough to convince both of them; in fact, after touching Vargas, she showed potential as a business negotiator. Together, they worked out a deal: the Tube would stay, but Vestcasa wouldn't build any others. Instead, they'd maintain it and the Gate as a tourist attraction — with Venus the principal star. Fergussen would remain in the pod as her companion and guide to visitors. There might even be time for him to work on a Vestcasa project or two.

Three hours after Vargas's tanker brought us back up to the Gate, the first load of alkali was slingshotted into the pans. Molly and I watched from a soft stool in the Hell's Gate bar as the contrail streaked across the low cloud tops. We toasted our envelopes with that nice fat split fee inside.

"I ought to sign this one over to you," I said.

She smiled. "Here's a pen."

"But then, we could use it to set

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up one hell of an office."

"Why not? Here's to Noah and Burke."

I let the name order pass for the moment. "There's only one thing still bugging me."

"What's that, Burke?"

"Kel's theta projector, the first one. I wonder what the hell happened to it."

She reached into her shoulder bag and pulled out a crystalline square.

"You mean this?" I yelped and jumped up.

"You knew! Damn you, you knew!"

"Had to get him to make his move," she said. "Besides, what a perfect way to keep a partner in line."

The fog had begun to fill the bar I started chasing her, and we were around the rim of the Gate when I Molly Noah and showed her a few of my own.

That's Venus for you.

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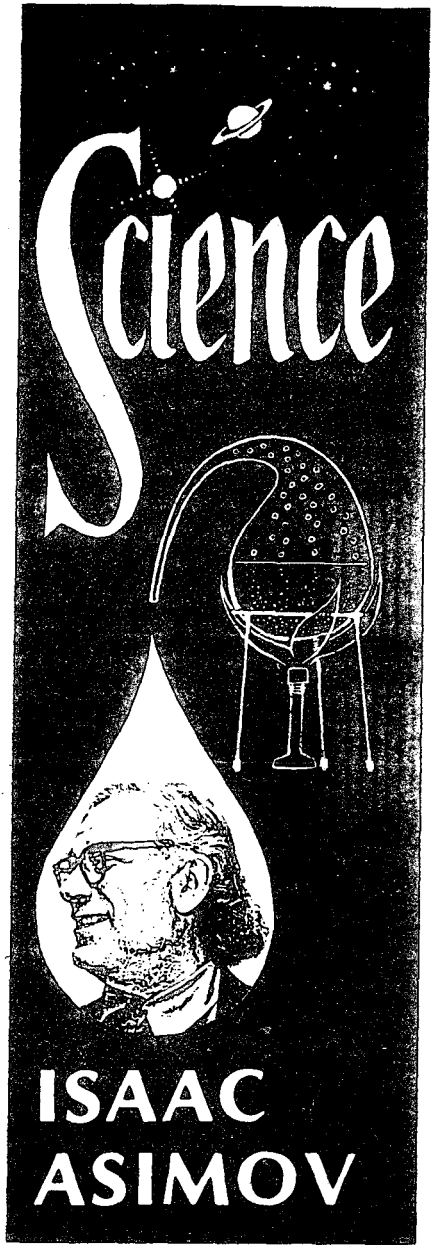

TRACING THE TRACES

My father was a man of decided opinions. Lacking a formal education outside his vast learning in Hebrew and in Biblical law and theology, he had to rely on common sense. That frequently misled him, of course; but, as I learned early in life, once he had formed his opinion, he never, by any chance, changed it — except when he happened, by some accident, to be correct in the first place.

I remember once, when my father was inveighing against the iniquities of "playing the numbers," as part of his shrewd way of seeing to it that his hopeful son would never fall prey to the wickedness and folly of gambling. (He never did.)

I listened for a while and then thought I would short-circuit it a bit and said, "I know, Poppa. You're supposed to pick a combination of three digits and there are a thousand such combinations. Therefore, your chance of picking the right combination is 1 in 1000, but you are only paid 600 to 1 if you win. That means that if you play a thousand numbers at a dollar a number, your chances are that you'll win once. You'll have spent a thousand dollars to get six hundred and the people who run the game keep the other four hundred."

My father said, "The chances are *less* than one in a thousand."

"No, Poppa. Suppose you take a

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thousand people and each picks a different combination of digits from 000 to 999. One of them will win, so the chances are one in a thousand."

"Aha, " said my father, "my smart son makes an argument! That's if every person picks a *different* combination. But who says they'll pick different combinations? They'll pick any combination they want and what if *no one* picks the right combination? That makes it less than one in a thousand."

"No, Poppa. That possibility is just balanced by the fact that in a few cases, two people will both pick the right combination."

My father stared at me with disbelief. "*Two* pick the right combination? *Impossible!*" And that ended the argument.

Of course, the ins and outs of probability are not always easy to follow even for trained mathematicians.

I recall another incident that came about after I began my course in quantitative analysis. I explained to my father the nature of a chemical balance and the extreme delicacy of its workings. It could weigh to a fraction of a milligram if it were properly calibrated and if its swings were properly observed — and a milligram was only about a thirty-thousandth of an ounce.

My father shook his head. "That's ridiculous," he said, "who could bother weighing such small amounts? They don't matter. A thirty-thousandth of an ounce of *anything* can't be important."

Nothing I said could convince him of the importance of extreme delicacy in analytical procedures.

And that brings me back to vitamins, last month's subject.

I ended last month's essay with the naming of two trace factors (substances which in very small amounts are necessary to life) as vitamin A and vitamin B; vitamin A being fat-soluble and vitamin B being water-soluble. Since every substance in the body that is soluble at all is soluble either in fat or in water, it would be neat if there were one vitamin for each and no more. However, it's too much to hope for to have things quite that simple.

Thus, vitamin B will prevent the disease of beri-beri, or cure it quickly if it already exists. It won't, however, do a thing for scurvy. There is something in orange juice, however, that will prevent or cure scurvy, but won't do a thing for beri-beri. The trace factor in orange juice was named "vitamin C" by Drummond, who I mentioned last month as suggesting

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the change from "vitamine" to "vitamin."

Although vitamin C, like vitamin B, was water-soluble, the two had to be different somehow, for they prevented and cured two different diseases, and neither had any effect on the other's disease.

Then, in 1922, a group of nutritionists at Johns Hopkins University showed that one could prevent the bone disease of rickets, or cure it, by proper dietary methods. Certain foods must therefore contain still another trace factor, which was named "vitamin D." This, like vitamin A, was fat-soluble, but again the two had to be different in some ways, for they affected different diseases.

Vitamins were frustrating substances because they could be looked upon as "mysterious." If a given food that was known to contain a particular vitamin was separated into its components and these were chemically purified, it would be found that none of the compounds would affect the disease so that none was the vitamin, even though the compounds added up to a hundred percent of the food, as nearly as could be measured. Either the vitamin was something immaterial and who-knows-what, or else it was an ordinary chemical compound but was present only in minute traces.

Naturally, if there is the slightest possibility that something vital to health is "mysterious," we know that all sorts of nonsense will be used to victimize the general public. Since vitamins were clearly too important to be allowed to drop into mystic mumbo-jumbo, there was considerable pressure on biochemists to identify the vitamins as particular compounds — to trace the traces, in other words.

But how does one do that? Suppose one takes orange juice and adds a certain chemical that will attach itself to certain molecules in the orange juice to form an insoluble substance, while leaving other molecules untouched and still in solution. Separate the insoluble substance from the solution and then ask yourself: is the vitamin C in the insoluble substance or in what is left of the juice?

How can you tell? The sure way is to place a living thing on a diet known to contain no vitamin C so that it will produce scurvy. Then, once scurvy appears, add to some of the diets the insoluble substance and to other diets what is left of the juice, and see which one (if either) will cure the scurvy. That one will contain vitamin C.

That's not as easy as it sounds. Scurvy can be made to appear in human beings, particularly in babies, but you can't very well experiment with babies, inducing and curing scurvy in them. You have to use some

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other animal and obtain the necessary information.

It turned out, unfortunately that animals generally are far less sensitive to scurvy formation than human beings are. Diets that would give us scurvy handily don't bother them.

By 1919, however, two types of animals were found which could be made to suffer from scurvy. One included the various types of monkeys, who are apparently close enough to us in the evolutionary tree to react as we do to the absence or presence of vitamin C. The trouble there is that monkeys are expensive animals and hard to handle.

Luckily, it turned out that the guinea pig could also be used for the purpose and would develop scurvy even more easily than the human being. What's more, guinea pigs are cheap and easy to handle.

By means of "animal assays," then, one could determine which foods had vitamin C, and which did not. One could even determine how much vitamin C a particular food had (in arbitrary units). One could also determine, in this way, that vitamin C was easily destroyed by heating or by oxygen.

Most important of all, one could treat vitamin C sources chemically and follow the vitamin C content of the various fractions into which the food item was divided. Inevitably, some fractions were prepared that had vitamin C in greater concentration than any natural food had.

By 1929, the American biochemist Charles Glen King (1896-) and his associates had produced a solid material such that a gram of it would contain as much vitamin C as two liters of lemon juice (or, to put it another way, one ounce of it would contain as much vitamin C as about sixty quarts of lemon juice).

In England, meanwhile, a Hungarian biochemist, Albert Szent-Györgyi (born in 1893, and still actively engaged in research today at the age of 91), was investigating "oxidation-reduction reactions." In living tissue, some compounds are prone to give up a pair of hydrogen atoms (this being equivalent to "oxidation") and others are prone to accept a pair of hydrogen atoms (equivalent to "reduction").

One can picture certain compounds as capable of assisting such reactions if they themselves have a particularly easy ability to do both. Such compounds will pick up two hydrogen atoms from molecule A and give them up to molecule B. They are then ready to pick up two more hydrogen atoms, pass them along, and so on. These compounds are called "hydrogen carriers."

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Since oxidation-reduction reactions are vital to the function of living organisms, it is clear that hydrogen carriers can be very important, and are worth investigating.

In 1928, Szent-Györgyi isolated a particularly active hydrogen carrier from adrenal glands. From its chemical reactions, it seemed to be related to sugars, but it had an acid group at one end of the molecule rather than an alcohol group. Such sugar-related molecules were known to biochemists and were lumped together as "uronic acids." There are a number of varieties of such uronic acids possible, however, and all that Szent-Györgyi could tell about his compound at first was that it had six carbon atoms in the molecule. He called it "hexuronic acid," therefore, "hex" being the Greek word for "six."

Meanwhile, King, working on his concentrated vitamin C material, finally managed, in 1931, to obtain a pure crystalline substance from it that showed extremely strong vitamin activity. Half a milligram (1/57,000 of an ounce) of those crystals added to the daily diet each day would protect a guinea pig from scurvy. There seemed no question but that the crystals were vitamin C itself. The trace had been traced and the vitamin became a definite, known material substance.

As those crystals were studied, it became clear that it was the same compound that Szent-Györgyi had called hexuronic acid. It seems, then, that Szent-Györgyi was the first person to isolate vitamin C and King was the first to recognize the fact that it *was* vitamin C. As a result, the two generally share the credit of the discovery.

In 1933, Szent-Györgyi suggested that his hexuronic acid be renamed "ascorbic acid," now that its vitamin nature was understood. The new name comes from Greek words meaning "no scurvy," and that has been its name ever since, though vitamin C is still commonly used by the public as well.

Once sizable quantities of pure ascorbic acid could be isolated (especially after Szent-Györgyi found that red peppers were particularly rich in it, and used that as a source) chemists quickly worked out its exact chemical structure, accurately placing each of the twenty atoms (six carbon atoms, eight hydrogen atoms, and six oxygen atoms) in its place in the molecule.

Even before the exact structure had finally been worked out, methods were discovered for synthesizing ascorbic acid. The synthetic ascorbic acid is just as effective a vitamin as the natural material is. The two molecules are identical. Whether a chemist or a plant makes it, all

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the atoms are in the right place, and there is no way of distinguishing between them. After that, ascorbic acid could be made by the ton if that were necessary.

The isolation, structural determination, and synthesis of ascorbic acid was, in itself, enough to remove any "mystery" from the vitamins. Ascorbic acid is a molecule like other molecule, made up of atoms like other atoms, and amenable to study and manipulation by the ordinary rules of chemistry. What's more, the mere fact that one vitamin could be reduced to prosaic chemistry made it reasonably certain that all could.

And all have. Every known vitamin has by now had its molecular structure worked out.

Naturally, biochemists were working on vitamin B as well as on vitamin C, and, in some ways, vitamin B was the easier task, For one thing, vitamin B, whatever it was, turned out to have a molecule that was tougher than that of vitamin C. Vitamin B was less likely to be degraded by heat or oxygen than vitamin C was, so that the former could be knocked about by the various chemical procedures used to isolate it without suffering too much damage.

What's more, most animals are quite sensitive to the lack of vitamin B, as compared with the relatively few that are sensitive to the lack of vitamin C. It was illness in chickens, as I mentioned last month, that gave the crucial clue to the nature of the prevention and cure of human beri-beri. Consequently, animal assays of vitamin B were easier to handle than those of vitamin C, with the even more convenient white rat used in place of the guinea pig.

As early as 1912, Funk managed to obtain, from yeast, a crude mixture of crystals that tested out by animal assay to be quite concentrated in vitamin B activity.

It was because Funk detected the presence of an amine group in the vitamin B concentrate, and because of his guess that all vitamins might contain them, that he invented the name "vitamine," as described last month. And it was because, for one thing, no amine group could be detected in concentrates of vitamin C, that the final "e" was knocked off the name.

By 1926, concentrates of vitamin B were prepared that seemed to be pure. Attempts at analyzing the small quantities of such concentrates (by methods that required the weighing of very tiny quantities, despite my father's skepticism as to the worth of such things) produced preli-

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minary judgements that the molecule of vitamin B contained carbon, hydrogen, oxygen (almost all organic molecules do) and nitrogen (which a sizable quantity of them do). So far, so good, but biochemists kept plugging away, trying to get the vitamin B concentrates purer, and to isolate them in greater quantities.

In 1932, a Japanese biochemist, S. Ohdake, working with tiny quantities of vitamin B material, reported the detection of sulfur atoms in the molecule. This wasn't exactly unprecedented, for sulfur atoms are to be found, for instance, in almost all protein molecules. However, of the five types of atoms most likely to be present in the molecules of living tissue — carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen, and sulfur — sulfur is the least common. So startling was this discovery (which was soon confirmed) that vitamin B was given the name "thiamine," or, even more commonly nowadays, "thiamin." The "thi-" prefix comes from the Greek "theion," meaning "sulfur."

Finally, in 1934, the American chemist Robert Runnels Williams (1886-1965) and his co-workers managed to refine the purification method to the point of getting completely pure thiamine. By his methods, it took a ton of rice polishings — the outer husks of the unpolished grains — to yield 5 grams (3/17 of an ounce) of thiamin.

The structure of vitamin B was then worked out in detail to the exact position of every atom in its molecule. In order to check whether the determination was really correct, Williams began with simpler compounds of known composition and then put them together step by step by means of chemical reactions that produced known changes. Eventually, he formed a compound that should have been the thiamin molecule, if the analysis had been correct. And, indeed, the synthetic compound proved to be the thiamin molecule, for it had the same chemical properties as the natural substances had, and it also had the same preventive and curative effect on beri-beri.

The thiamin molecule contains two rings of atoms, connected by a one-atom bridge. There are also two small side-chains of atoms attached to each ring. It is the rings themselves, however, to which I want to call attention.

Rings of atoms are very common in organic compounds and are most often made up of five or of six atoms. Very often, all five or all six atoms of the ring are carbon atoms, but sometimes one or two of the atoms in the ring may be nitrogen or oxygen or sulfur. Any ring containing atoms other than carbon is said to be "heterocyclic," where "hetero" is from a

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Greek word meaning "other" or "different."

Both rings in the thiamin molecule are heterocyclic. One of the rings consists of six atoms, two of which are nitrogen. The other ring consists of five atoms, one of which is nitrogen and one sulfur.

In the process of attempting to concentrate vitamin B, biochemists discovered that they sometimes got fractions that seemed to be important to nutrition and yet had no effect as far as beri-beri was concerned.

There is, for instance, a disease called "pellagra," characterized most visibly by a dry, cracked skin, that occurs under conditions of limited and monotonous diets and that can be cured by broadening the diet. The dietary connection was definitely demonstrated in 1915 by an Austrian-American physician, Joseph Goldberger (1874-1929).

By that time, enough was known about vitamins for a research to begin at once for purified fractions with anti-pellagra action. At first it seemed that substances that would cure beri-beri might also cure pellagra, but the fractions being tested were sufficiently impure for it to be possible that more than one vitamin might be present.

Then, in 1926, it was found that it was possible to heat concentrates strongly enough to destroy the anti-beri-beri action, but to leave the anti-pellagra effect untouched. This made it look as though there were two vitamins, one of which had a molecule more heat-resistant (and, therefore, probably simpler) than the other.

In 1937, an American biochemist, Conrad Arnold Elvehjem (1901-1962), followed a trail of investigation that led him to try a rather simple substance on dogs suffering from "blacktongue," a disease very similar to human pellagra. A single, tiny dose sufficed for rapid and marked improvement. It was the vitamin.

Its molecules consisted of a single ring of six atoms (five carbon and one nitrogen) with hydrogen atoms and a small one-carbon acid group attached. It had first been isolated from living tissue in 1912, without any suspicion of its vitamin nature, of course. It had been formed in the laboratory, however, as long before as 1867 by a chemist named C. Huber.

Huber began with nicotine, the well-known alkaloid found in tobacco. The nicotine molecule consists of two heterocyclic rings, one of five atoms and one of six atoms. One atom of each ring were bound to each other. Huber treated the nicotine in such a way as to break up the five-atom ring, leaving only the carbon atom that was attached to the six-atom ring, and converting that atom into an acid group. He therefore

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named the six-atom ring, with its acid group side-chain, "nicotinic acid," as an indication of the more complicated compound from which he had obtained it.

When an organic compound is substantially changed, there is no necessary connection between the properties of the original and the product; none at all. Nicotine is a toxic substance, nicotinic acid is relatively harmless. In fact, in tiny quantities, it is essential to life. It was nicotinic acid that Elvehjem had demonstrated to be the anti-pellagra vitamin.

That set up a problem for the medical profession. The general public was not expected to understand the finer points of organic chemistry. If nicotinic acid were hailed as a vitamin, then some people were going to think that there must be something healthy in nicotine, and they were going to start smoking, or increase the dose if they were already smoking, on the assumption that this would keep them from developing pellagra.

Physicians, therefore, insisted on making use of a shortened form of "nicotinic acid vitamin." They used the first two letters of the first, word, the first two of the second word, and the last two of the third, and, behold, they had "niacin," which is now the most common name of the vitamin.

The same procedures that isolated concentrates containing thiamin and niacin also contained small quantities of other substances vital to life. In some cases, nutritionists knew of no diseases corresponding to deficiencies of those factors, because the factors were so widely spread in food and were required in such small quantities that almost any human diet was bound to have enough of such materials for a person to get along on.

Nutritionists and biochemists had to feed rats, or other experimental animals, on special purified diets containing only known vitamins and minerals and no other trace substances, and then, when some abnormality about the animal developed, they had to find some food that would correct the abnormality, and search for a compound within the food that would be the vitamin.

Eventually, it became quite certain that in extracting vitamin B from food, one pulled out a whole family of somewhat related compounds —all water-soluble, all containing heterocyclic rings of one kind or another, all vital to life in tiny quantities.

The whole can be referred to as the "B-vitamin complex." Before the

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nature of the molecules was determined, they were named vitamin B_1, vitamin B_2 and so on up to vitamin B_{14}.

Most of them turned out to be false alarms, but vitamin B_1 is thiamin, of course. Vitamin B_2 is now better known as "riboflavin," vitamin B_6 is "pyridoxin" and vitamin B_{12} is "cyanocobalamin." Niacin doesn't have a vitamin B name, and neither do such other members of the complex as biotin, folic acid, and pantothenic acid. In fact, the only member of the B-vitamin complex in which the vitamin B name is more common than the name is vitamin B_{12}, perhaps because the chemical name is so complicated and because it was the last to be given.

Not all vitamins belong to the B-complex, of course. Vitamin C doesn't, even though it is water-soluble, because it is so different in structure from members of the complex. Vitamin C lacks nitrogen atoms in its molecule, while all members of the complex possess them.

Then, too, any vitamin that is fat-soluble is, by that fact alone, not a member of the B-complex. Besides, fat-soluble vitamins also lack nitrogen atoms. In addition to vitamin A and vitamin D, the fat-soluble vitamins include vitamin E and vitamin K.

(What happened to the letters between E and K? Well, vitamin F was a false alarm, vitamin G was eventually identified with riboflavin and vitamin H with biotin, so those both turned out to be members of the B complex. As for vitamin K, that was named out of alphabetical order because it was involved with the mechanism of blood coagulation and in German, "coagulation" is spelled "Koagulation." Since the discoverers of the vitamin were German, vitamin K seemed a natural.)

Now that all the vitamins are structurally well known and can be synthesized in one way or another, there is a much diminished danger of vitamin shortage in any society that has the synthetics available. You can eat whatever pleases you and add to it a judicious selection of vitamin pills, and you will be safe from scurvy, beri-beri, pellagra and the rest.

To be sure, there are people who believe in "megavitamin therapy," where "mega" is a Greek word meaning "very large." The feeling among such people is that although tiny doses of this vitamin or that are sufficient to keep off visible disease, those diseases represent major breakdowns. Larger quantities of the vitamin might be needed to keep things moving completely smoothly, thus preventing minor disorders that, although not visible to the naked eyes, take their toll as the years pass. There is also the feeling that though a reasonably healthy person need

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only take small doses of vitamins, there are disorders that are not generally recognized as vitamin-related that will benefit from large doses of some vitamin.

The best known aspect of megavitamin therapy is the use of large doses of vitamin C. This is backed by the famous American chemist, Linus Pauling (1901-), and vitamin C has been supposed to be useful in preventing colds, and even in ameliorating cancer.

I tend to be dubious about such claims. The body doesn't seem to store water-soluble vitamins, and so any supply over and above immediate needs is excreted through the kidneys. I see no great need to consume pills in large numbers merely in order to enrich the urine.

With fat-soluble vitamins, the case is different. Reactions in fat aren't as rapid as those in water, so that fat-soluble vitamins are not so easily

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and quickly disposed of. They are stored and tend to accumulate.If the accumulation passes beyond a certain point, the results can be harmful. Vitamin A and vitamin D will, in large doses, produce toxic effects.

Fish and fish-eating animals may accumulate vitamins A and D far beyond the safe capacity of other animals. That's the reason that before vitamin pills became available, some youngsters had their lives made into living hells by being regularly dosed with cod-liver oil.

There are also horror tales, the truth of which is not very certain, that polar bears have livers that accumulate vitamin A to such a grandiose extent that Arctic explorers who had, on occasion, eaten polar bear livers, went on to die of vitamin A toxicity.

Space, however, is used up, and I must wait until next month to take up what I consider the most unusual vitamin of them all.

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Paul DiFilippo writes that he didn't want to be "anything but a writer since age seventeen, but it somehow took thirteen years of trying — desultorily at first, lately with a certain sternness — to do it." His work has appeared in Unearth Magazine *and on the Op-Ed page of* The New York Times, *and he recently sold two stories to* Twilight Zone. *His first story for* F & SF, *"Stone Lives," shows the importance of a "good education" — in fact, it can be hard to survive without it.*

Stone Lives

BY
PAUL DI FILIPPO

Odors boil around the Immigration Offices, a stenchy soup. The sweat of desperate men and women, ripe garbage strewn in the packed street, the spicy scent worn by one of the guards at the outer door. The mix is heady, almost overpowering to anyone born outside the Bungle, but Stone is used to it. The constant smells constitute the only atmosphere he has ever known, his native element, too familiar to be despised.

Noise swells to rival the stench. Harsh voices raised in dispute, whining voices lowered to entreat. "Don't sluff me, you rotty bastard!" "I'd treat you real nice, honey, for a share of that." From the vicinity of the door into Immigration, an artificial voice is reciting the day's job offerings, cycling tirelessly through the rotty choices.

"—to test new aerosol antipersonnel toxins. 4M will contract to provide survivors with a full Citrine rejuve. High-orbit vakheads needed by McDonnell Douglas. Must be willing to be imprinted—"

No one seems eager to rush forward and claim these jobs. No voices beg the guards for entrance. Only those who have incurred impossible debts or enmity inside the Bungle ever take a chance on the Rating -10 assignments, which are Immigation's disdainful handouts. Stone knows for sure that he wants no part of these rigged propositions. Like all the rest, he is here at Immigration simply because it provides a focal point, a gathering place as vital as a Serengeti water hole, where the sneaky sluffs and raw deals that pass for business in the South Bronx FEZ — a.k.a. the Bronx Jungle, a.k.a. the Bungle — can be transacted.

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Heat smites the noisy crowd, making them more irritable than usual — a dangerous situation. Hyperalertness parches Stone's throat. He reaches for the scratched-to-his-touch plastic flask at his hip and swigs some stale water. Stale but safe, he thinks, relishing his secret knowledge. It was pure luck that he ever stumbled upon the slow leak in the inter-FEZ pipe down by the river fence that encircles the Bungle. He smelled the clean water like a dog from a distance, and by running his hands along several meters of chilly pipe, he found the drip. Now he has all the manifold cues to its exact location deeply memorized.

Shuffling through the crowd on bare calloused feet (amazing what information can be picked up through the soles to keep body and soul intact!), Stone quests for scraps of information that will help him survive another day in the Bungle. Survival is his main — his only — concern. If Stone has any pride left, after enduring what he has endured, it is pride in surviving.

A brassy voice claims, "I booted some tempo, man, and that was the end of *that* fight. Thirty seconds later, all three're dead." A listener whistles admiringly. Stone imagines he latches on somehow to a boot of tempo and sells it for an enormous profit, which he them spends on a dry, safe place to sleep and enough to fill his ever-empty gut. Not damn likely, but a nice dream nonetheless.

Thought of food causes his stomach to churn. Across the rough, encrusted cloth covering his midriff, he rests his right hand with its sharp lance of pain that marks the infected cut. Stone assumes the infection. He has no way of telling for sure until it begins to stink.

Stone's progress through the babble of voices and crush of flesh has brought him fairly close to the entrance to Immigration. He feels a volume of empty air between the crowds and the guards, a quarter-sphere of respect and fear, its vertical face the wall of the building. The respect is generated by the employed status of the guards; the fear by their weapons.

Someone — a transported felon with a little education — once described the guns to Stone. Long, bulky tubes with a bulge halfway along their length where the wiggler magnets are. Plastic stocks and grips. They emit charged beams of energetic electrons at relativistic speeds. If the scythe of the beam touches you, the kinetic energy imparted blows you apart like a squashed sausage. If the particle beam chances to miss, the accompanying cone of gamma rays produces radiation sickness that is fatal within hours.

Of the explanation — which Stone remembers verbatim — he understands only the description of a horrible death. It is enough.

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Stone pauses a moment. A familiar voice — that of Mary, the rat-seller —is speaking conspiratorially of the next shipment of charity clothes. Stone deduces her position as being on the very inner edge of the crowd. She lowers her voice. Stone can't make out her words, which are worth hearing. He edges forward, leery though he is of being trapped inside the clot of people—

A dead silence. No one is speaking or moving. Stone senses displaced air puff from between the guards: someone occupies the door.

"You." A refined woman's voice. "Young man with no shoes, in the"— Her voice hestitates for the adjective hiding beneath the grime— "red jumpsuit. Come here, please. I want to talk to you."

Stone doesn't know if it is he (red?), until he feels the pressure of all eyes upon him. At once he pivots, swerves, fakes — but it is too late. Dozens of eager claws grab him. He wrenches. Moldy fabric splits, but the hands refasten on his skin. He bites, kicks, pummels. No use. During the struggle he makes no sound. Finally he is dragged forward, still fighting, past that invisible line that marks another world as surely as does the unbreachable fence between the Bungle and the other twenty-two FEZ.

Cinnamon scent envelops him, a guard holds something cold and metallic to the back of his neck. All the cells in his skull seem to flare at once, then darkness comes.

Three people betray their forms and locations to the awakened Stone by the air they displace, their scents, their voices — and by a fourth, subtle component he has always labeled sense-of-life.

Behind him: a bulky man who breathes awkwardly, no doubt because of Stone's ripe odor. This has to be a guard.

To his left: a smaller person — the woman? — smelling like flowers. (Once Stone smelled a flower.)

Before him, deskbound: a seated man.

Stone feels no aftereffects from the device used on him — unless the total disorientation that has overtaken him is it. He has no idea why he has been shanghaied, and wishes only to return to the known dangers of the Bungle.

But he knows they are not about to let him.

The woman speaks, her voice the sweetest Stone has ever heard.

"This man will ask you some questions. Once you answer them, I'll have one for you. Is that all right?"

Stone nods, his only choice as he sees it.

"Name?" says the Immigration official.

"Stone."

"That's all?"

"That's all anyone calls me." (Unbearable white-hot pain when they dug out the eyes of the little urchin

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they caught watching them carve up the corpse. But he never cried, oh, no; and so: Stone.)

"Place of birth?"

"This shitheap, right here. Where else?"

"Parents?"

"What're they?"

"Age?"

A shrug.

"That can be fixed later with a cellscan. I suppose we have enough to issue your card. Hold still now."

Stone feels multiple pencils of warmth scroll over his face; seconds later, a chuntering sound from the desk.

"This is your proof of citizenship and access to the system. Don't lose it."

Stone extends a hand in the direction of the voice, receives a plastic rectangle. He goes to shove it into a pocket, finds them both ripped away in the scuffle, and continues to hold the plastic awkwardly, as if it is a brick of gold about to be snatched away.

"Now my question." The woman's voice is like a distant memory Stone has of love. "Do you want a job?"

Stone's trip wire has been brushed. A job they can't even announce in public? It must so fracking bad that it's off the common corporate scale.

"No thanks, miz. My life ain't much, but it's all I got." He turns to leave.

"Although I can't give you details until you accept, we'll register a contract right now that stipulates it's a Rating-1 job."

Stone stops dead. It has to be a sick joke. But what if it's true?

"A contract?"

"Officer," the woman commands.

A key is tapped, and the desk recites a contract. To Stone's untutored ears, it sounds straightforward and without traps. A Rating-1 job for an unspecified period, either party able to terminate the contract, job description to be appended later.

Stone hesitates only seconds. Memories of all the frightful nights and painful days in the Bungle swarm in his head, along with the hot central pleasure of having survived. Irrationally, he feels a moment's regret at leaving behind the secret city spring he so cleverly found. But it passes.

"I guess you need this to O.K. it," Stone says, offering up his newly won card.

"I guess we do," the woman says with a laugh.

The quiet, sealed car moves through busy streets. Despite the lack of outside noise, the chauffeur's comments on the traffic and their frequent halts are enough to convey a sense of the bustling city around them.

"Where are we now?" Stone asks for the tenth time. Besides wanting the information, he loves to hear this woman speak. Her voice, he thinks

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—its's like a spring rain when you're safe inside.

"Madison-Park FEZ, traveling crosstown."

Stone nods appreciatively. She may as well have said, "In orbit, blasting for the moon," for all the fuzzy mental image he gets.

Before they would let Stone leave, Immigration did several things to him. Shaved all his body hair off; deloused him; made him shower for ten minutes with a mildly abrasive soap; disinfected him; ran several instant tests; pumped six shots into him; and issued him underwear, clean coveralls, and shoes (shoes!)

The alien smell of himself only makes the woman's perfume more attractive. In the close confines of the backseat, Stone swims in it. Finally he can contain himself no longer.

"Uh, that perfume — what kind is it?"

"Lily of the valley."

The mellifluous phrase makes Stone feel as if he is in another, kinder century. He swears he will always remember it. And he will.

"Hey!" Consternation. "I don't even know your name."

"June. June Tannhauser."

June Stone. June and Stone and lilies of the valley. June in June with Stone in the valley with the lilies. It's like a song that won't cease in his head.

"Where are we going?" he asks over the silent song in his head.

"To a doctor," says June.

"I thought that was all taken care of."

"This man's a specialist. An eye specialist."

This is the final jolt, atop so many, knocking even the happy song out of Stone's head.

He sits tense for the rest of the ride, unthinking.

"This is a life-size model of what we're going to implant in you," the doctor says, putting a cool ball in Stone's hand.

Stone squeezes it in disbelief.

"The heart of this eye system is CCD's — charge-coupled devices. Every bit of light — photon — that hits them triggers one or more electrons. These electrons are collected as a continuous signal, which is fed through an interpreter chip to your optic nerves. The result: perfect sight."

Stone grips the model so hard his palm bruises.

"Cosmetically, they're a bit shocking. In a young man like yourself, I'd recommend organic implants. However, I have orders from the person footing the bill that these are what you get. And of course, there are several advantages to them."

When Stone does not ask what they are, the doctor continues anyway.

"By thinking mnemonic keywords that the chip is programmed for, you can perform several functions.

"One : You can store digitalized

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copies of a particular sight in the chip's RAM, for later display. When you reinvoke it with the keyword, it will seem as if you are seeing the sight again directly, no matter what you are actually looking at. Resumption of real-time vision is another keyword.

"Two: By stepping down the ratio of photons to electrons, you can do such things as stare directly at the sun or at a welder's flame without damage.

"Three: By upping the ratio, you can achieve a fair degree of normal sight in conditions such as a starry, moonless night.

"Four: For enhancement purposes, you can generate false-color images. Black becomes white to your brain, the old rose-colored glasses, whatever.

"And I think that about covers it."

"What's the time frame on this, Doctor?" June asks.

The doctor assumes an academic tone, obviously eager to show professional acumen.

"A day for the actual operation, two days, accelerated recovery, a week of training and further healing — say, two weeks, max."

"Very good," June says. Stone feels her rise from the couch beside him, but remains seated.

"Stone," she says, a hand on his shoulder, "time to go."

But Stone can't get up, because the tears won't stop.

• • •

The steel and glass canyons of New York — that proud and flourishing union of Free Enterprise Zones — are a dozen shades of cool blue, stretching away to the north. The streets that run with geometric precision like distant rivers on the canyon floors are an arterial red. To the west and east, snatches of the Hudson River and the East River are visible as lime-green flows. Central Park is a wall of sunflower-yellow halfway up the island. To the northeast of the park, the Bungle is a black wasteland.

Stone savors the view. Vision of any kind, even the foggiest blurs, was an unthinkable treasure only days ago. And what he has actually been gifted with — this marvelous ability to turn the everyday world into a jeweled wonderland — is almost too much to believe.

Momentarily sated, Stone wills his gaze back to normal. The city instantly reverts to its traditional color of steel-gray, sky-blue, treegreen. The view is still magnificent.

Stone stands at a bank of windows on the 150th floor of the Citrine Tower, in the Wall Street FEZ. For the past two weeks, this has been his home, from which he has not stirred. His only visitors have been a nurse, a cyber-therapist, and June. The isolation and relative lack of human contact do not bother him. After the Bungle, such quiet is bliss. And then, of course, he has been enmeshed in the sensuous web of sight.

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The first thing he saw upon waking after the operation set the glorious tone of his visual explorations. The smiling face of a woman hovered above him. Her skin was a pellucid olive, her eyes a radiant brown, her hair a raven cascade framing her face.

"How are you feeling?" June asked.

"Good," Stone said. Then he uttered a phrase he never had a use for before. "Thank you."

June waved a slim hand negligently. "Don't thank me. I didn't pay for it."

And that was when Stone learned that June was not his employer, that she worked for someone else. And although she wouldn't tell him then to whom he was indebted, he soon learned when they moved him from the hospital to the building that bore her name.

Alice Citrine. Even Stone knew of her.

Turning from the windows, Stone stalks across the thick cream-colored rug of his quarters. (How strange to move so confidently, without halting and probing!) He has spent the past fifteen days or so zealously practicing with his new eyes. Everything the doctor promised him is true. The miracle of sight pushed into new dimensions. It's all been thrilling. And the luxury of his situation is undeniable. Any kind of food he wants. (Although he would have been satisfied with frack — processed krill.) Music, holovision,and most prized, the company of June. But all of a sudden today, he is feeling a little irritable. Where and what is this job they hired him for? Why has he not met his employer face to face yet? He begins to wonder if this is all some sort of ultraelaborate sluff.

Stone stops before a full-length mirror mounted on a closet door. Mirrors still have the power to fascinate him utterly. That totally obedient duplicate imitating one's every move, will-less except for his will. And the secondary world in the background, unattainable and silent. During the years in the Bungle when he still retained his eyes, Stone never saw his reflection in anything but puddles or shards of windows. Now he confronts the immaculate stranger in the mirror, seeking clues in his features to the essential personality beneath.

Stone is short and skinny, traces of malnourishment plain in his stature. But his limbs are straight, his lean muscles hard. His skin where it shows from beneath the sleeveless black one-piece is weather-roughened and scarred. Plyoskin slippers — tough, yet almost as good as barefoot — cover his feet.

His face. All intersecting planes, like that strange picture in his bedroom. (Did June say "Picasso"?) Sharp jaw, thin nose, blond stubble on his skull. And his eyes: faceted dull-black hemispheres: inhuman. But don't take them back, please; I'll do

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whatever you want.

Behind him the exit door to his suite opens. It's June. Without conscious thought, Stone's impatience spills out in words, which pile one for one atop June's simultaneous sentence, merging completely at the end.

"I want to see—"

"We're going to visit—"

"—Alice Citrine."

Fifty floors above Stone's suite, the view of the city is even more spectacular. Stone has learned from June that the Citrine Tower stands on land that did not even exist a century ago. Pressure to expand motivated a vast landfill in the East River, south of the Brooklyn Bridge. On part of this artificial real estate, the Citrine Tower was built in the Oughts, during the boom period following the Second Constitutional Convention.

Stone boosts the photon-electron ratio of his eyes, and the East River becomes a sheet of white fire.

A momentary diversion to ease his nerves.

"Stand here with me," June says, indicating a disk just beyond the elevator door, a few meters from another entrance.

Stone complies. He imagines he can feel the scanning rays on him, although it is probably just the nearness of June, whose elbow touches his. Her scent fills his nostrils, and he fervently hopes that having eyes won't dull his other senses.

Silently the door opens for them. June guides him through.

Alice Citrine waits inside.

The woman sits in a powered chair behind a horseshoe-shaped bank of screens. Her short hair is corn-yellow, her skin unlined, yet Stone intuits a vast age clinging to her, the same way he used to be able to sense emotions when blind. He studies her aquiline profile, familiar somehow as a face once dreamed is familiar.

She swivels, presenting her full features. June has led them to within a meter of the burnished console.

"Good to see you, Mr. Stone," says Citrine. "I take it you are comfortable, no complaints."

"Yes," Stone says. He tries to summon up the thanks he meant to give, but can't find them anywhere, so disconcerted is he. Instead, he says tentatively, "My job—"

"Naturally you're curious," Citrine says. "It must be something underhanded or loathsome or deadly. Why else would I need to recruit someone from the Bungle? Well, let me at last satisfy you. Your job, Mr. Stone, is to study."

Stone is dumbfounded. "Study?"

"Yes, study. You know the meaning of the word, don't you? Or have I made a mistake? Study, learn, investigate, and whenever you feel you understand something, draft me a report."

Stone's bafflement had passed through amazement to incredulity. "I

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can't even read or write," he says. "And what the frack am I supposed to study?"

"Your field of study, Mr. Stone, is this contemporary world of ours. I have had a large part, as you may know, in making this world what it is today. And as I reach the limits of my life, I grow more interested in whether what I have built is bad or good. I have plenty of reports from experts, both positive and negative. But what I want now is a fresh view from one of the underdwellers. All I ask is honesty and accuracy.

"As for reading and writing — those outmoded skills of my youth — June will assist you in learning those if you wish. But you have machines to read to you and transcribe your speech. You may start at once."

Stone tries to assimilate this mad request. It seems capricious, a cover for deeper, darker deeds. But what can he do except say yes?

He agrees.

A tiny smile plucks at the woman's lips. "Fine. Then our talk is over. Oh, one last thing. If you need to conduct on-site research, June must accompany you. And you will mention my sponsorship of you to no one. I don't want sycophants."

The conditions are easy — especially having June always close — and Stone nods his acceptance.

Citrine turns her back to them then. Stone is startled by what he sees, almost believing his eyes defective.

Perched on the broad back of her chair is a small animal resembling a lemur or tarsier. Its big, luminous eyes gaze soulfully at them, its long tail arcs in a spiral above its back.

"Her pet," whispers June, and hurries Stone away.

The task is too huge, too complex. Stone considers himself a fool for ever having accepted.

But what else could he have done, if he wanted to keep his eyes?

Stone's cramped and circumscribed life in the Bungle has not prepared him well to fathom the multiplex, extravagant, pulsating world he has been transported to. (At least this is what he initially feels.) Literally and figuratively kept in the dark for so long, he finds the world outside the Citrine Tower a mystifying place.

There are hundreds, thousands of things he has never heard of before. People, cities, objects, events. There are areas of expertise whose names he can hardly pronounce. Areology, chaoticism, fractal modeling, paraneurology. And don't forget history, that bottomless well atop which the present moment is but a scrim of bubbles. Stone is, perhaps, most shocked by his discovery of history. He cannot recall ever having considered life as extending backward in time beyond his birth. The revelation of decades, centuries, millennia nearly pushes him into a mental abyss.

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How can one hope to comprehend the present without knowing all that has gone before?

Hopeless, insane, suicidal to persist.

Yet Stone persists.

He closets himself with his magic window on the world, a terminal that interfaces with the central computer in the Citrine Tower — itself a vast, unintelligible hive of activity — and through that machine, to almost every other in the world. For hours on end, images and words flash by him, like knives thrown by a circus performer — knives that he, the loyal but dumb assistant, must catch to survive.

Stone's memory is excellent, trained in a cruel school, and he assimilates much. But each path he follows has a branch every few steps, and each branch splits at frequent points, and those tertiary branches also sprout new ones, no less rich than the primaries. . . .

Once Stone nearly drowned, when a gang left him unconscious in a gutter and it began to rain. He recalls the sensation now.

June brings him three meals faithfully each day. Her presence still thrills him. Each night, as he lies abed, he replays stored images of her to lull him asleep. June bending, sitting, laughing, her Asian eyes aglow. The subtle curves of her breasts and hips. But the knowledge-fever is stronger, and he tends to ignore her as the days go by.

One afternoon Stone notices a pill on his lunch tray. He asks June its nature.

"Its a mnemotropin — promotes the encoding of long-term memories," she replies. "I thought it might help you."

Stone swallows it greedily, and returns to the droning screen.

Each day he finds a pill at lunch His brain seems to expand to a larger volume soon after he takes them. The effect is potent, allowing him to imagine he can ingest the world. But still, each night when he finally forces himself to stop, he feels he has not done enough.

Weeks pass. He has not prepared a single sentence for Alice Citrine. What does he understand? Nothing. How can he pass judgment on the world? It's hubris, folly. How long will she wait before she kicks his ass out onto the cold street?

Stone drops his head in his hands. The mocking machine before him torments him with a steady diarrhea of useless facts.

A hand falls lightly on his quivering shoulder. Stone imbibes June's sweet scent.

Stone smashes the terminal's power stud with the base of his palm so fiercely it hurts. Blessed silence. He looks up at June.

"I'm no damn good at this. Why'd she pick me? I don't even know where to start."

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June sits on a cushion beside him. "Stone, I haven't said anything, because I was ordered not to direct you. But I don't think sharing a little of my experience will count as interference. You've got to limit your topic, Stone. The world's too big. Alice doesn't expect you to comprehend it all, distill it into a masterpiece of concision and sense.

"The world doesn't lend itself to such summations, anyway. I think you unconsciously know what she wants. She gave you a clue when you talked to her."

Stone summons up that day, plays back a view he filed of the stern old woman. Her features occult June's. The visual cue drags along a phrase.

"—whether what I have built is bad or good."

It is as if Stone's eyes have overloaded. Insight floods him with relief. Of course, the vain and powerful woman sees her life as the dominant theme of the modern era, a radiant thread passing through time, with critical nodes of action strung on it like beads. How much easier to understand a single human life than that of the whole world. (Or so he believes at the moment.) That much he thinks he can do. Chart Citrine's personal history, the ramifications of her long career, the ripples spreading from her throne. Who knows? It might indeed prove archetypal.

Stone wraps his arms around June in exultation, gives a wordless shout. She doesn't resist his embrace, and they fall back upon the couch.

Her lips are warm and complaisant under his. Her nipples seem to burn through her shirt and into his chest. His leg left is trapped between her thighs.

Suddenly he pulls back. He has seen himself too vividly: scrawny cast off from the sewer of the city, with eyes not even human.

"No," he says bitterly. "You can't want me."

"Quiet," she says, "quiet." Her hands are on his face; she kisses his neck; his spine melts; and he falls atop her again, too hungry to stop.

"You're so foolish for someone so smart," she murmurs to him afterwards. "Just like Alice."

He does not consider her meaning.

The roof of the Citrine Tower is a landing facility for phaetons, the suborbital vehicles of companies and their executives. He feels he has learned all he can of Alice Citrine's life, while cooped up in the tower. Now he wants the heft and feel of actual places and people to judge her by.

But before they may leave, June tells Stone, they must speak to Jerrold Scarfe.

In a small departure lounge, all soft white corrugated walls and molded chairs, the three meet.

Scarfe is head of security for Citrine Technologies. A compact, wiry

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man, exhibiting a minimum of facial expressions, he strikes Stone as eminently competent, from the top of his permanently depilated and tattooed skull to his booted feet. On his chest he wears the CT emblem: a red spiral with an arrowhead on its outer terminus, pointing up.

June greets Scarfe with some familiarity, and asks, "Are we cleared?"

Scarfe waggles a sheet of flimsy in the air. "Your flight plan is quite extensive. Is it really necessary, for instance, to visit a place like Mexico City, with Mr. Stone aboard?"

Stone wonders at Scarfe's solicitude for him, an unimportant stranger. June interprets Stone's puzzled look and explains. "Jerrold is one of the few people that know you represent Miz Citrine. Naturally, he's worried that if we run into trouble of some kind, the fallout will descend on Citrine Technologies."

"I'm not looking for trouble, Mr. Scarfe. I just want to do my job."

Scarfe scans Stone as intently as the devices outside Alice Citrine's sanctum. The favorable result is eventually expressed as a mild grunt, and the announcement, "Your pilot's waiting. Go ahead."

Higher off the grasping earth than he has ever been before, his right hand atop June's left knee, feeling wild and rich and free, Stone ruminates over his life of Alice Citrine, and the sense he is beginning to make of it.

Alice Citrine is 159 years old. When she was born, America was still comprised of states, rather than FEZ and ARCadias. Man had barely begun to fly. When she was in her sixties, she headed a firm called Citrine Biotics. This was the time of the Trade Wars, wars as deadly and decisive as military ones, yet fought with tarriffs and five-year plans, automated assembly lines and fifth-generation decision-making constructs. This was also the time of the Second Constitutional Convention, that revamping of America for the state of war.

During the years when the country was being divided into Free Enterprise Zones — urban, hi-tek, autonomous regions where the only laws were those imposed by corporations and the only goal was profits and dominance — and Areas of Restrictive Control — rural, mainly agricultural enclaves, where older values were strictly enforced — Citrine Biotics refined and perfected the work of their reseachers and others in the field of carbon chips: microbiological assemblies, blood-borne programmed repair units. The final product, marketed by Citrine to those who could afford it, was near-total rejuvenation, the cell-slough — or, simply, the sluff.

Citrine Biotics headed the Fortune 500 within six years.

By then it was Citrine Technologies.

And Alice Citrine sat atop it all.

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But not forever.

Entropy will not be cheated. The information — degradation that DNA undergoes with age is not totally reversible. Errors accumulate despite the hardworking carbon chips. The body dutiful gives out the end.

Alice Citrine is nearing the theoretical close of her extended life. Despite her youthful looks, one day a vital organ will fail, the result of a million bad transcriptions.

She needs Stone, of all people, to justify her existence.

Stone squeezes June's knee and relishes the sense of importance. For the first time in his sad and dingy life, he can make a difference. His words, his perceptions *matter*. He is determined to do a good job, to tell the truth as he perceives it.

"June," Stone says emphatically, "I have to see everything."

She smiles. "You will, Stone. You will indeed."

And the phaeton comes down — in Mexico City, which crashed last year at population 35 million. Citrine Technologies is funding a relief effort there, operating out of their Houston and Dallas locations. Stone is suspicious of the motives behind the campaign. Why didn't they step in before the point of collapse? Can it be that they are worried now only about refugees flooding across the border? Whatever the reasons, though, Stone cannot deny that the CT workers are a force for good, ministering to the sick and hungry, reestablishing electrical power and communications, propping up (acting as?) the city government. He boards the phaeton with his head spinning, and soon finds himself—

—in the Antarctic, where he and June are choppered out from the CT domes to a krill-processing ship, source of so much of the world's protein. June finds the frack stench offensive, but Stone breathes deeply, exhilarated at being afloat in these strange and icy latitudes, watching the capable men and woman work. June is happy to be soon aloft, and then—

—in Peking, where CT heuristic specialists are working on the first Artificial Organic Intelligence. Stone listens with amusement to a debate over whether the AOI should be named K'ung Fu-tzu or Mao.

The week is a kaleidoscopic whirl of impressions. Stone feels like a sponge, soaking up the sights and sounds so long denied him. At one point he finds himself leaving a restaurant with June, in a city whose name he has forgotten. In his hand is his ID card, with which he had just paid for their meal. A holoportrait stares up from his palm. The face is cadaverous, filthy, with two empty, crusted sockets for eyes. Stone remembers the warm laser fingers taking his holo in the Immigration Office. Was that really he? The day

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seems like an event from someone else's life. He pockets his card, unsure whether to have the holo updated or to keep it as a token of where he has come from.

And where he might end up?

(What will she do with him after he reports?)

When Stone asks one day to see orbital installations, June calls a halt.

"I think we've done enough for one trip, Stone. Let's get back, so you can start to put it all together."

With her words, a deep bone-weariness suddenly overtakes Stone, and his manic high evaporates. He silently assents.

• • •

Stone's bedroom is dark, except for the diffuse lights of the city seeping in through a window. Stone has multiplied his vision, the better to admire the naked growing form of June beside him. He has found that colors grow muddy in the absence of enough photons, but that a very vivid black-and white image can be had. He feels like a dweller in the past century, watching a primitive film. Except that June is very much alive beneath his hands.

June's body is a tracery of lambent lines, like some arcane capillary circuitry in the core of Mao/K'ung Futzu. Following the current craze, she has had a subdermal pattern of microchannels implanted. The channels are filled with synthetic luciferase, the biochemical responsible for the glow of fireflies, which she can now trigger at will. In the afterglow of their lovemaking, she has set herself alight. Her breasts are whorls of cold fire, her shaven pubic mound a spiral galaxy dragging Stone's gaze into illimitable depths.

June is speaking in a abstracted way of her life before Stone, pondering the ceiling while he idly strokes her.

"My mother was the only surviving child of two refugees. Vietnamese. Came to America shortly after the Asian War. Did the only thing they knew how to do, which was fish. They lived in Texas, on the Gulf. My mother went to college on a scholarship. There she met my father, who was another refugee of sorts. He left Germany with his parents after its Reunification. They said the compromise government was neither one thing nor the other, and they couldn't deal with it. I guess my background is some sort of microcosm of alot of the upheavals of our times."

She catches Stone's hand between her knees and holds it tightly. "But I feel a calmness with you right now, Stone."

As she continues to speak of things she has seen, people she has known, her career as Citrine's personal assistant, the oddest feeling creeps over Stone. As her words integrate themselves into his growing picture of the world, he feels the same abysmal tidal suck that he first felt upon

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learning of history.

Before he can decide consciously if he even wants to know or not, he finds himself saying, "June. How old are you?"

She falls silent. Stone watches her staring blindly at him, unequipped with his damned perceptive eyes.

"Over sixty," she finally says. "Does it matter?"

Stone finds he cannot answer, does not know if it does or not.

Slowly June wills her glowing body dark.

Stone bitterly amuses himself with what he likes to think of as his art.

Perusing the literature on the silicon chip that dwells in his skull, he found that it has one property not mentioned by the doctor. The contents of its RAM can be squirted in a signal to a stand-alone computer. There the images he has collected may be displayed for all to see. What is more, the digitalized images may be manipulated, recombined with themselves or with stock graphics, to form entirely lifelike pictures of things that never existed. These, of course, may be printed off.

In effect, Stone is a living camera and his computer a complete studio.

Stone has been working on a series of images of June. The color printouts litter his quarters, hung on wall and underfoot.

June's head on the Sphinx's body. June as La Belle Dame Sans Merci. June's face imposed upon the full moon, Stone asleep in a field as Endymion.

The portraits are more disturbing than soothing, and, Stone senses, quite unfair. But Stone feels that he is gaining some therapeutic effect from them, that each day he is inching closer to his true feelings for June.

He still has not spoken to Alice Citrine. That nags him greatly. When will he deliver his report? What will he say?

The problem of when is solved for him that afternoon. Returning from one of the tower's private gyms, he finds his terminal flashing a message.

Citrine will see him in the morning.

• • •

Alone this second time, Stone stands on the plate before Alice Citrine's room, allowing his identity to be verified. He hopes the results will be shared with him when the machine finishes, for he has no idea of who he is.

The door slides into the wall, a beckoning cavern mouth.

Avernus, Stone thinks, and enters.

Alice Citrine remains where she sat so many event-congested weeks ago, unchanged, seemingly sempiternal. The screens flicker in epileptic patterns on three sides of her instrumented chair. Now, however, she ignores them, her eyes on Stone, who advances with trepidation.

Stone stops before her, the console an uncrossable moat between

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them. He notes her features this second time with a mix of disbelief and alarm. They seem to resemble his newly fleshed-out face to an uncanny degree. Has he come to look like this woman simply by working for her? Or does life outside the Bungle stamp the same harsh lines on everyone?

Citrine brushes her hand above her lap, and Stone notices her pet curled in the vally of her brown robe, its preternaturally large eyes catching the colors on the monitors.

"Time for a preliminary report, Mr. Stone," she says. "But your pulse rate is much too high. Relax a bit — everything does not hinge on this one session."

Stone wishes he could. But there is no offer of a seat, and he knows that what he says will be judged.

"So — what do you feel about this world of ours, which bears the impress of myself and others like me?"

The smug superiority in Citrine's voice drives all caution from Stone's thoughts, and he nearly shouts, "It's unfair." He pauses a moment, and then honesty forces him to admit, "Beautiful, gaudy, exciting at times — but basically unfair."

Citrine seems pleased at his outburst. "Very good, Mr. Stone. You have discovered the basic contradiction of life. There are jewels in the dung heap, tears amid the laughter, and how it is all parceled out, no one knows. I'm afraid I cannot shoulder the blame for the world's unfairness, though. It was unfair when I was a child, and remained unfair despite all my actions. In fact, I may have increased the disparity a little. The rich are richer, the poor seemingly poorer by comparison. But still, even the titans are brought down by death in the end."

"But why don't you try harder to change things?" Stone demands. "It has to be within your power."

For the first time, Citrine laughs, and Stone hears an echo of his own sometimes bitter caw.

"Mr. Stone," she says, "I have all I can do to stay alive. And I do not mean taking care of my body — that is attended to automatically. No, I mean avoiding assassination. Haven't you gleaned the true nature of business in this world of ours?

Stone fails to see her meaning, and says so.

"Allow me to brief you, then. It might alter a few of your perceptions. You are aware of the intended purpose of the Second Constitutional Convention, are you not? It was couched in high-flown phrases like "unleash the strength of the American system," and "meet foreign competition head-to-head, ensuring a victory for American business that will pave the way for democracy throughout the world." All very noble-sounding. But the actual outcome was quite different. Business has no stake in any political system per se. Business cooperates to the extent that

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cooperation furthers its own interests. And the primary interest of business is growth and dominance. Once the establishment of the Free Enterprise Zones freed corporations from all constraints, they reverted to a primal struggle, which continues to this day."

Stone attempts to digest all this. He has seen no overt struggles on his journey. Yet he has vaguely sensed undercurrents of tension everywhere. But surely she is overstating the case. Why, she makes the civilized world sound more than a large-scale version of the anarchy of the Bungle.

As if reading his mind, Citrine says, "Did you ever wonder why the Bungle remains blighted and exploited in the midst of the city, Mr. Stone, its people in misery?"

Suddenly all of Citrine's screens flash with scenes of Bungle life, obedient to her unvoiced command. Stone is taken aback. Here are the sordid details of his youth: urine-reeking alleys with rag-covered forms lying halfway between sleep and death, the chaos around the Immigration Office, the razor-topped fence by the river.

"The Bungle," Citrine continues, "is congested ground. It has been so for over eighty years. The corporation cannot agree over who is to develop it. Any improvement made by one is immediately destroyed by the tactical team of another. This is the kind stalemate prevalent in much of the world.

"Everyone wanted to be pulled into an earthly paradise by his purse strings, like a Krishna devotee by his pigtail. But this patchwork of fiefdoms is what we got instead."

Stone's conceptions are reeling. He came expecting to be quizzed and to disgorge all he thought he knew. Instead, he has been lectured and provoked, almost as if Citrine is testing whether he is a partner fit to debate. Has he passed or failed?

Citrine settles the question with her next words. "That's enough for today, Mr. Stone. Go back and think some more. We'll talk again."

For three weeks Stone meets nearly every day with Citrine. Together they explore a bewildering array of her concerns. Stone gradually becomes more confident of himself, expressing his opinions and observations in a firmer tone. They do not always mesh with Citrine's, yet on the whole he feels a surprising kinship and affinity with the ancient woman.

Sometimes it almost seems as if she is grooming him, master and apprentice, and is proud of his progress. At other times she holds herself distant and aloof.

The weeks have brought other changes. Although Stone has not slept with June since that fateful night, he no longer sees her as the siren figure

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of his portraits, and has stopped depicting her in that fashion. They are friends, and Stone visits with her often, enjoys her company, is forever grateful to her part in rescuing him from the Bungle.

During his interviews with Citrine, her pet is a constant spectator. Its enigmatic presence disturbs Stone. He has found no trace of sentimental affection in Citrine, and cannot fathom her attention to the creature.

One day Stone finally asks Citrine outright why she keeps it.

Her lips twitch in what passes for her smile. "Aegypt is my touchstone on the true perspective of things, Mr. Stone. Perhaps you do not recognize her breed."

Stone admits ignorance.

"This is *Aegyptopithecus zeuxis,* Mr. Stone. Her kind last flourished several million years ago. Currently she is the only specimen extant, a clone — or rather, a re-creation based on dead fossil cells.

"She is your ancestor and mine, Mr. Stone. Before the hominids, she was the representative of mankind on earth. When I pet her, I contemplate how little we have advanced."

Stone turns and stalks off, unaccountably repelled by the antiquity of the beast and the insight into her mistress.

This is the last time he will see Alice Citrine.

Nighttime.

Stone lies alone in bed, replaying snapshots of his terminal screen, of pre-FEZ history that has eluded him.

History that has eluded him.

Suddenly there is a loud crack like the simultaneous discharge of a thousand gigantic arcs of static electricity. At that exact second, two things happen:

Stone feels an instant of vertigo.

His eyes go dead.

Atop these shocks, an enormous explosion above his head rocks the entire shaft of the Citrine Tower.

Stone shoots to his feet, clad only in briefs, barefoot as in the Bungle. He can't believe he's blind. But he is. Back in the dark world of smell and sound and touch alone.

Alarms are going off everywhere. Stone rushes out into his front room with its useless view of the city. He approaches the front door, but it fails to open. He reaches for the manual control, but hesitates.

What can he do while blind? he'd just stumble around, get in the way. Better to stay here and wait out whatever is happening.

Stone thinks of June then, can almost smell her perfume. Surely she will be down momentarily to tell him what's going on. That's it. He'll wait for June.

Stone paces nervously for three minutes. He can't believe his loss of vision. Yet somehow he's always known it would happen.

The alarms have stopped, allowing Stone to hear near-subliminal foot-

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steps in the hall, advancing on his door. June at last? No, everything's wrong. Stone's sense-of-life denies that the visitor is anyone he knows.

Stone's Bungle instincts take over. He ceases to speculate about what is happening, is all speed and fear.

The curtains in the room are tied back with thin but velvet cords. Stone rips one hastily down, takes up a position to the side of the outer door.

The shock wave when the door is hit nearly knocks Stone down. But he regains his balance, tasting blood, just as the man barrels in and past him.

Stone is on the man's burly back in a flash, legs wrapped around his waist, cord around his throat.

The man drops his gun, hurls himself back against the wall. Stone feels ribs give, but he tightens the rope, muscles straining.

The two stagger around the room, smashing furniture and vases, locked in something like an obscene mating posture.

Eventually, after forever, the man keels over, landing heavily atop Stone.

Stone never relents, until he is sure the man has stopped breathing.

His attacker is dead.

Stone lives.

He wriggles painfully out from under the slack mass, shaken and hurt.

As he gets his feet under him, he hears more people approaching, speaking.

Jerrold Scarfe is the first to enter, calling Stone by name. When he spots Stone, Scarfe shouts, "Get that stretcher over here."

Men bundle Stone onto the canvas and begin to carry him off.

Scarfe walks beside him, and conducts a surrealistic converstion.

"They learned who you were, Mr. Stone. That one fracking bastard got by us. We contained the rest in the wreckage of the upper floors. They hit us with a directed electromagnetic pulse that took out all our electronics, including your vision. You might have lost a few brain cells when it burned, but nothing that can't be fixed. After the EMP, they used a missile on Miz Citrine's floor. I'm afraid she died instantly."

Stone feels as if he is being shaken to pieces, both physically and mentally. Why is Scarfe telling him this? And what about June?

Stone croaks her name.

"She's dead, Mr. Stone. When the raiders assigned to bag her had begun to work on her, she killed herself with an inplanted toxin-sac."

All the lilies wither when winter draws near.

The stretcher party has reached the medical facilities. Stone is lifted onto a bed, and clean hands begin to attend to his injuries.

"Mr. Stone, " Scarfe continues, "I must insist that you listen to this. It's imperative, and it will take only a minute."

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Stone has begun to hate this insistent voice. But he cannot close his ears or lapse into blessed unconsciousness, so he is forced to hear the cassette Scarfe plays.

It is Alice Citrine speaking.

"Blood of my blood," she begins, "closer than a son to me. You are the only one I could ever trust."

Disgust washes over Stone as everything clicks into place and he realizes what he is.

"You are hearing this after my death. This means that what I have built is now yours. All the people have been bought to ensure this. It is now up to you to retain their loyalty. I hope our talks have helped you. If not, you will need even more luck than I wish you now.

"Please forgive your abandonment in the Bungle. It's just that a good education is so important, and I believe you received the best. I was always watching you."

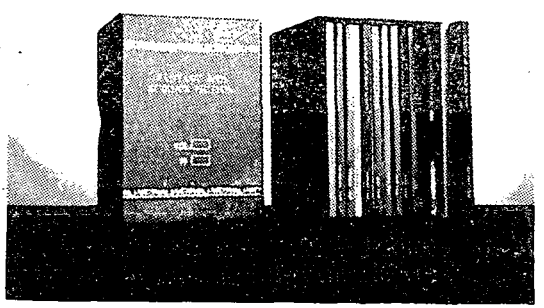
Scarfe shuts off the cassette. "What are your orders, Mr. Stone?"

Stone thinks with agonizing slowness while unseen people minister to him.

"Just clean this mess up, Scarfe. Just clean up this whole goddamn mess."

But he knows as he speaks that this is not Scarfe's job.

It's his.



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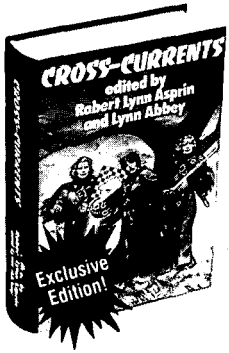

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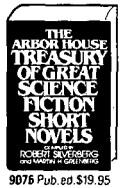

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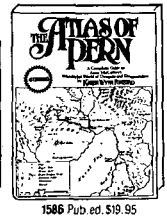

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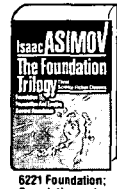

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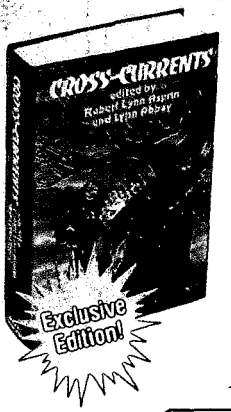

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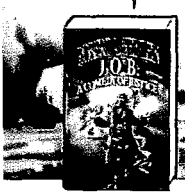

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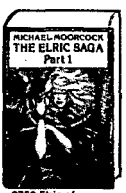

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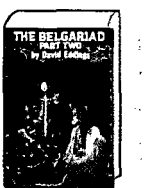

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